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Monday, April 09, 2007

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David Guralnick / Detroit News

Ornate architectural details are common throughout the neighborhood.

Woodward Avenue: A journey through 200 years

Neighborhood Grandeur

Michael H. Hodges / The Detroit News

As in so many things, Henry Ford was ahead of his time.

Or perhaps we should credit Clara Ford, not her husband, since everyone agrees that Clara was always the one most interested in their homes.

It was 1908 when the Fords and their teenage son, Edsel, became one of the very first families to move into the new "subdivision" we know as the Boston-Edison Historic District, their surprisingly modest 7,500-square-foot "Italian Renaissance Eclectic" house rising up among the empty fields.

At the time, a man of Ford's considerable -- and soon-to-be stupendous -- means had any

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number of spectacular possibilities to choose from along Woodward Avenue, whether Virginia Park or East Ferry Avenue, both elegant side streets, to one of the great mansions on the increasingly congested thoroughfare itself.

But perhaps the Bill Gates of the early 20th century was driven by that age-old real-estate mantra: location, location, location.

The house on Edison Street, notes Jerald Mitchell, the Boston-Edison archivist who's lived in Ford's home since 1985, was about equidistant from Ford's Piquette plant, where he built the Model T, and the Highland Park factory, which opened in 1910.

"He didn't care to commute," Mitchell says.

The prosperity that Detroit generated in the early 20th century was, of course, dizzying. Hard on the heels of Boston-Edison came other luxury developments on upper Woodward, including Arden Park, Sherwood Forest and Palmer Woods -- eventually reaching into Bloomfield Hills.

"The wealth grew so rapidly," says Stephen Vogel, dean of architecture at the University of Detroit Mercy, "that the auto barons kept moving further and further out" to escape congestion and factory smoke.

The city's top architects brought their talents to bear upon these "suburban-style" houses, with their extravagant detailing and extensive maids' quarters, including Albert Kahn -- who would later design the paradigm-busting Ford Rouge complex -- and the firm of Malcolmson and Higginbotham, which designed Ford's home on Edison.

The result was a formally gracious neighborhood of arching elms (now mostly replaced by other trees), straight streets edged by sidewalks, and narrow, grassy malls running down a couple of the most spectacular avenues.

The nexus between great wealth and the early auto industry is inescapable when looking at Boston-Edison pioneers.

Several of the Fisher brothers -- think "Body by Fisher" -- had homes there, as did the vice president of Packard Motor Car, the president of Detroit Electric Car (Clara Ford drove one of those), the General Motors treasurer and the presidents of both the Regal and Hupp Motor Car Companies.

Other captains of industry who put down roots in Boston-Edison before the mid-'20s included Sebastian S. Kresge, founder of the S. S. Kresge Co. (forerunner of Kmart), Tigers owner Walter Briggs, and Ernst Kern, the founder of Kern's Department Store.

[See full image](#)

Last week's answer this week's clue

The serene expression on this ornate emblem graces the center of Orchestra Hall's facade. The music hall was built in 1919 in a record four months and 23 days. It has had several incarnations over the years, including a stint as the Paradise Theater, before its restoration as home of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

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Tiger base-stealing legend Ty Cobb lived there briefly as would, half a century later, Willie Horton.

And the first permanent conductor of the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Ossip Gabrilowitsch -- another long-time resident -- married Mark Twain's daughter. Years later, an unpublished manuscript of "Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer Among the Indians" was discovered in their Boston Boulevard West attic, and donated to the Burton Collection at the Detroit Public Library.

Diverse for its time

In any case, it's hard to beat Boston-Edison for luxury, where homes like Edward T. Fisher's Renaissance Revival mansion on West Boston boasts 11 bathrooms. Boston-Edison stood out in other unexpected ways. Almost unique among subdivisions of that era for the super-rich, it had no restrictive covenants governing who was, and who was not, allowed to purchase.

As a consequence, the district from the start included some of Detroit's most prominent families, including Temple Beth-El's Rabbi Leo M. Franklin and Benjamin Siegel, founder of B. Siegel, once the largest women's clothing store in the Midwest.

(In one of those great historical ironies, Ford, the celebrated anti-Semite, was friends with Franklin and presented him with a Model T.)

Jacob Siegel, who launched the American Lady Corset Co. on Fort Street, built his American Eclectic mansion on West Boston in 1917. Interestingly, as a young man living in Washington, D.C., Siegel had witnessed Abraham Lincoln's assassination at Ford's Theatre.

'Among the titans'

It all leaves Patrice Merritt, who's lived in Siegel's mansion with her husband for 12 years, the sense she's brushing shoulders with a particularly distinguished group of ghosts.

"Every time I drive by various houses, I always think, 'Well, Mr. Kresge would be very proud.' Not a day goes by that I don't think, 'Wow! I'm living among the titans.' "

Of course, residing in palatial splendor has its ups and downs.

Merritt laughs.

"Don't even ask what our January heating bill was."

And here's luxury for you: The Merritt's house is 7,500 square feet. But it's only got three *very* spacious bedrooms.

Typical of many of the Boston-Edison manses, the Merritts enjoy the service of an

Sherwood Forest [See full image](#)



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Virginia Park [See full image](#)



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One-time Tigers owner Walter Briggs lived in this manor on Boston. [See full image](#)



David Coates / The Detroit News

Sherwood Forest [See full image](#)

elevator, a central vacuuming system dating to the home's construction, and -- if they wanted to renovate it -- a basement oak spinner with a foot-pedal agitator to help dry just-washed clothes.

"It was the spin cycle of its time," says Merritt, executive director of the Detroit Public Library Friends Foundation.

The Fords only lived in their Edison Street home for about seven years, before amassing 2,000 acres along the Rouge River in Dearborn for their 30,000-square-foot "Prairie Gothic villa," as the American Institute of Architects guide to Detroit puts it.

But while they were still in Boston-Edison, the neighborhood must have had a downright clubby feel for a Ford man.

Horace Rackham, one of the original 12 Ford shareholders, lived down the block in his American Eclectic home built one year before Ford's.

James Couzens, Ford Motor Co.'s treasurer (and later Detroit mayor and U.S. senator), moved into his Tudor Revival on nearby Longfellow Avenue in 1910. Another early Ford investor, Charles D. Bennett, had built his Boston-Edison manse in 1906.

But in the end, the man who upended world industry, suggests Mitchell, was driven out of Boston-Edison by his rising celebrity.

Ford moved, Mitchell says, "principally because of the loss of privacy. People were showing up on the front porch asking for jobs."

Given that they started building Fair Lane in 1909, shortly after moving to Boston-Edison, it's clear the Fords must have been planning the move for some time.

But for the great commoner who'd grown up on a farm, it's hard to shake the sense that something was lost in his retreat from an "ordinary" house surrounded by neighbors to his regal isolation in the Dearborn woods.

"They moved to Fair Lane," Mitchell says, "put up gates, and became isolated."

Virginia Park

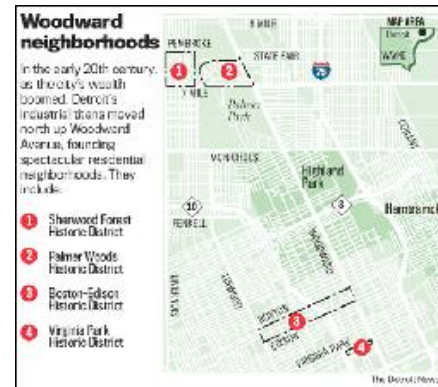
A teensy historic district of great charm -- it encompasses just Virginia Park from Woodward Avenue to the John Lodge Freeway -- this handsome street, platted in 1893, was one of the first developments to materialize north of Grand Boulevard.

Styles that predominate include Tudor, Arts-and-Crafts and Bungalow, but it's the red-brick Georgian Revivals near Woodward that set the formal tone for the rest of the avenue.

Virginia Park had fallen on hard times as early as the Depression, and anyone driving along the grand street in the 1970s would have been dismayed, indeed. But in recent years, many of the homes have been spectacularly renovated, and it still constitutes one of the handsomest, most



Ankur Dholakia The Detroit News
Grady and Patrice Merritt bought industrialist Jacob Siegel's 1917 Boston-Edison mansion 12 years ago, largely because Grady was nuts about the dining room. [See full image](#)



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formal residential avenues in the city.

Sherwood Forest

Tucked away just west of the better-known Palmer Woods, Sherwood Forest is one of residential Detroit's best-kept secrets. Designed to resemble an English village, the neighborhood features winding streets with houses that average about 3,600 square feet. Mostly built in the 1920s, the 435 homes lean heavily toward English styles like Georgian Colonials or Tudors. Flat roofs were strictly prohibited.

Like many of Detroit's oldest neighborhoods for the industrial and business elite, Sherwood Forest was initially restricted to members "of the Caucasian race," though that covenant was thrown out by the courts in 1948.

Palmer Woods

Launched at almost the same time as adjacent Sherwood Forest, Palmer Woods is the leafy subdivision of winding streets and impressive mansions located on the west side of Woodward Avenue just north of Palmer Park.

Built on 188 acres that originally belonged to Thomas Witherell Palmer (who donated the land for the park), a Detroit land developer and businessman who was later Ambassador to Spain, Palmer Woods was laid out by landscape architect Ossian Cole Simonds for those individuals who wanted larger lots and a more "rural" feel than in either Indian Village on the city's east side, or the Boston-Edison neighborhood just south on Woodward.

Style-wise, the area favors Mediterranean, Georgian and Tudor homes.

The architecture

Confused by the parade of architectural style names?

Most extravagant Detroit homes built in the late 19th and early 20th century are "revival" designs -- that is, local takes on Europe's great buildings, which wealthy Americans who'd done the Grand Tour of the old continent came home bent on imitating.

So a Renaissance or Mediterranean Revival was likely built to suggest an Italian villa of centuries past, while Neo-Tudors ape the steeply pitched roofs, narrow windows and sometimes the decorative half-timbering associated with 16th-century English mansions.

Nearly all of the houses in the great historic neighborhoods of Upper Woodward Avenue -- whether Boston-Edison or Palmer Woods -- are "eclectic," however, in that there tends to be a cheerful mish-mash of design elements from different times and countries.

Stephen Vogel, dean of architecture at the University of Detroit Mercy, notes the best homes in these neighborhoods also have rich detailing from the Arts-and-Crafts movement, which trumpeted a return to the handcrafted detailing of the sort that had begun to disappear after the Industrial Revolution.

Michael H. Hodges

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