

In 2002, The Wednesday Journal did a wonderful commemorative section honoring its centennial. It was entitled "Oak Park Stories 100 Years of Big News in a Small Town." Excerpts of articles from that edition are presented here, with permission from The Wednesday Journal.



## How a Great Books group led to a political revolution

By KEN TRAINOR

In 1949, Oak Park, believe it or not, was ruled by machine politics—Republican machine politics.

The Republican committeeman at the time was a political hack named Walter McCarron. The Oak Park comptroller, Robert Glaesel, who would later be accused of graft and corruption, was the machine's candidate for village president, which meant almost certainly he would win.

Many residents were dissatisfied with the state of affairs in local government. Often more than half of the village board wouldn't even show up for meetings. But most people didn't know enough about political organizing to mount a credible opposition. "There were pretty murky procedures for getting on the ballot," recalls Cy Giddings, one of the "young Turks" who decided to try to "cut the legs out from the bunch who were getting into office."

So a few prominent community members—Dwight Follett, Wally Austin, Jean and Gene Moore, Giddings, and Kay McDaniel, daughter of the OPRF High School superintendent, Marion Ross McDaniel—organized something called "Education for Democracy," which evolved out of a Great Books discussion group.

In order to learn the ropes of political organizing, they decided to field a slate of candidates to oppose the powerful (and misnamed) Nonpartisan Civic Party. A third party also ran, headed by Olaf Carlsson, who insisted that he would accept only \$1 as salary if elected.



The race garnered considerable attention from the Chicago newspapers, which noted the grassroots efforts of Education for Democracy.

Predictably, their Village Independent Party slate went down to defeat and by a 2-1 margin, but that election also represented the beginning of the end for the old machine.

The new political organization, began pushing for a change in municipal government to the village manager form, which stressed greater professionalism. Cincinnati was the most prominent city in the U.S. to employ a non-political professional to run village hall. The new form promised better and more honest government. Evanston was also experimenting with it.

The Education for Democracy rebels renamed themselves the Village Manager Association and managed to get a referendum on the ballot in 1952. Oak Park voters approved the change.

But that was only half the battle. Not surprisingly, the machine wasn't exactly motivated to enact the change, so the VMA put up a slate of candidates to oppose them in the '53 election.

They persuaded an older, respected figure around town, Herb Knight, to head the ticket and run for village president. The only hitch was he had a heart attack before the election and though he was elected, he

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couldn't serve. The VMA talked Russ Christiansen into stepping in as his successor. So President Knight's first action after being elected was to step down as president and hand the reins of power over to his successor.

Mark Keane was soon hired as the village's first manager.

Despite this inauspicious beginning, the VMA fulfilled its promise of better government and set the stage for much of the progress that occurred in the second half of the century in Oak Park. Many of those who worked in the fair housing movement in the '60s, worked with the VMA to get the village's groundbreaking Fair Housing Ordinance passed in 1968, and later became part of the VMA itself.

The rise of the VMA was, indeed, a crucial turning point for the village of Oak Park in the 20th century.