

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.



In the 1950s, OP took the high road and the low road

By KEN TRAINOR

The 1950s was a very constructive decade in Oak Park. The elementary schools were getting a 10-year overhaul for one thing. But the decade can probably best be characterized as: "You take the high road and I'll take the low road, and we'll get to and from Chicago at the same time."

The high road was the Lake Street rapid transit line (today known as the Green Line) which got the go-ahead in 1958 to literally become the "elevated."

The \$4 million project would raise the street level tracks onto the adjacent North Western embankment (another massive project that occurred in the early part of the century. Why they didn't do it then is anybody's guess). The work would take four years to complete.

Elevating the "el" would eliminate 22 "grade crossings" which were currently causing delays to an estimated 200,000 extremely frustrated motorists daily. One can only imagine what it would be like today. Numerous collisions, many with fatalities had also occurred at these crossings over the years.



The "low road" had been under construction, meanwhile, down on the south end of town, for most of the decade. Plans were set in motion for the ambitious new "Congress Superhighway" by 1950, an effort to reach the western suburbs, whose populations were swelling rapidly in the post-World War II era.

But the project caused a lot of anxiety among Oak Parkers—especially the ones who were about to be displaced. Basically the town lost the entire 900 block south from east to west as the expressway canyon cut a wide swath through the village. As the press put it at the time, at least 100 homes and 22 businesses were "doomed to the wrecking ball."

The construction itself, which wouldn't begin for several years, involved demolition of existing structures, digging the canyon, replacing the railroad tracks, which included the Congress rapid transit line, building the retaining walls and landscaping.

Appraisal crews and engineers were combing the neighborhood, deciding which properties needed to be razed, as nervous residents looked on. They would also determine what would be paid to the owners of the targeted homes and businesses. The alternative to accepting their price was to go through the condemnation process and take it to court.

The estimated \$11 million project was being called "the most expensive highway project ever undertaken in the nation."

Five overpasses were planned at Austin Boulevard, Ridgeland, East, Oak Park and Harlem avenues. Additional overpasses at Lombard and Home avenues would be paid for by the village (\$250,000). But

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taxpayers protested, so the plans were changed, and a pedestrian crosswalk was constructed for a mere \$50,000.

Exit ramps were initially planned for Austin and Harlem, but also at East Avenue. The earthen ramp can still be seen at East Avenue, but there was a public outcry and reportedly Msgr. Fitzgerald, pastor of nearby Ascension Church, used his political connections with Gov. Adlai Stevenson to kill that idea.

By 1956, with the construction work raising plenty of dust and noise and not a little anxiety to boot, local officials tried to calm the expressway's neighbors by predicting that real estate values would "rise dramatically" when the project was complete. Once the expressway opened, they added, there would actually be very little noise because the road ran so far below ground level.

Homes overlooking the expressway, officials claimed, would be in high demand because "there are many people who love to watch the traffic go by." And the finished product would be so attractively landscaped that the area would actually be "more beautiful than it was before."

By 1960, the CTA was just beginning work on the Lake Street elevation project, but construction on the Congress (which would eventually be renamed the Eisenhower Expressway) canyon was in its final phase. Work had been ongoing for six years at that point, so no doubt the southsiders were ready to see it end.

When the Lake Street crossings were finally eliminated in 1962, you could drive unobstructed from north to south.

But motorists still find plenty of reasons to complain.