

## History

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River Road, on land donated by William A Starkweather. For many who lived in the area, the new school was referred to as Riverside School, for its nearness to the Willamette River.

With the rapid increase of the number of children in the district, by 1890 the Concord Schoolhouse had opened its doors, and was welcoming students with school desks, a metal stove to keep the children warm in the winter, and bell tower with a booming bell to declare the start of classes for the day.

At the start of the 20th Century, folks living in what they were now calling Oak Grove were concerned about overcrowding at both the Concord and Milwaukie Schools. Citing the long distance their children had to travel to attend classes at either school, they lobbied for their own facility. By the following year, a new structure was in the making, and classes opened for students in the fall of 1904. The first Oak Grove School was situated on the north side of Center Avenue, between Cedar and Lee Avenues.

The Oak Grove School still lacked a baseball field, and a gymnasium for the 8th grade sports teams. The boys' team, which apparently fielded cocky and impressive baseball players, offered in the local newspapers a challenge to all comers in the State of Oregon to schedule a game against their team. Supporters and parents of the players had to travel to the Courtney Baseball Diamond just north of Oak Grove to watch the home team play. The Oak Grove basketball team played all of their home games in Green's Hall, at the intersection of Railroad Avenue and Central Street.

With a schoolhouse in place to further the education of Oak Grove children, the commercial district began developing beside the streetcar rails. Oak Grove was slowly establishing an identity – and newspapers such as the Oregonian, The Enterprise, and the Oregon City Courier began reporting on the expanding community that was named for a grove of oak trees that stood nearby.

In 1903, the Oregonian reported the population of Oak Grove had recently nearly doubled. Regional realtors Dunn and LaWrene announced in that newspaper that there were an abundance of empty lots, and farms with large acreage, for sale at Oak Grove through their office. They enthusiastically declared that over sixty residential homes could be then be found in the community.

The Dunn and LaWrene offices were situated in downtown Portland, and most home seekers and speculators looking to buy new property had to schedule an appointment with an agent and then travel by boat to Oak Grove Landing, in order to view the homes and lots for sale there. For residents who lived in the area, the Oak Grove Market proved to be a sounding board where they could post messages about real estate opportunities from local residents seeking to sell off excess property.

Open along Center Avenue, the Oak Grove Market was a place to purchase groceries, gather weather and crop conditions, share neighborhood gossip, and even find a new home to buy. The store also served as an unofficial Post



**The partnership of Linnett and Emmons operated a grocery store at what was then Railroad and Center Avenue (today, Oak Grove Boulevard) in the Green Building, in the early 1910s – obviously in the winter! A waiting room and ticket office for the Eastside Railway extends west to the railway track. This was the start of the Oak Grove commercial district, with the Green Building on the west side of the streetcar tracks, and E.C Warren's building on the east side.**

Office, collecting mail and delivering messages to the local residents until the opening of the Creighton Postal Station in 1904. As mentioned earlier, the name of the Post Office was changed to Oak Grove Post Office in 1907, at the request of the community, to clarify for those writing to them in what town the mail station was located.

The Oregonian – and the Oregon City newspaper, The Enterprise – reported a store being present in Oak Grove as early as 1903. By the following year the commercial district began growing; buildings were raised, and supplies were being stocked by new stores along Central Avenue. The September 12th, 1904, issue of the Oregonian announced, "Many new buildings are being built in the new growing settlement in Oak Grove". A.L. Petty was constructing a \$2,500 home, a school was opened, and the local market was serving residents. The Oak Grove Grocery advertised Leghorn Chickens and eggs for sale at their store, which they pointed out was on the Oregon City Railway Line.

Middle-class and working families who wanted to avoid crowds of people, noise from horses and wagons, and the rampant smoke associated with big city life of Portland, found that Oak Grove was an idyllic area to raise a family. Farmers were drawn there too, to build herds of dairy cows or to deal in live poultry. Others moved there to till the open fields or to clear hilly tree sections to grow the crops that were in high demand. Those not skilled in farming practices started their own gardens, growing fruits and planting vegetable gardens to support their family's needs or to sell produce to the local grocery stores and shops in Milwaukie, Sellwood, and Oregon City.

There isn't much evidence that a lot of immigrants settled in Oak Grove, but the local Methodist Church did offer weekly sermons in the German language, which

suggests that there must have been a number of Germans who lived nearby. People from the Old Country brought their farming and building skills from the fatherland, and were proficient in growing crops. Additionally, many Germans and Scandinavians were skilled carpenters, and might have been hired to build the new houses and farms that were beginning to fill up the countryside around Oak Grove.

With no major industries like lumber mills, canning and brick factories, or railroad or car barn shops nearby, the Oak Grove community concentrated on supporting agricultural endeavors. Fruits, vegetables, and hops seemed to be growing in abundance throughout the district.

The "Oak Grove Horticultural and Agricultural Fair" was started in 1909, in the first week of September, though the reporter for the Oregonian neglected to say just where in Oak Grove it was held. Over 700 people attended that indoor event, to view the agricultural exhibits and horticultural displays put on by the Oak Grove citizens. The now-annual event was regularly attended by farmers, who came to trade agricultural tips with others, to discuss crop conditions, and to check market prices. But one highlight of the fair seemed to revolve around an Oak Grove pioneer named C.B. Bonell, who proudly displayed a pair of deer antlers at the end of the agricultural hall, and he claimed he'd shot that deer at the exact spot where the fair was holding its exhibits just 30 years before.

Portland has always been known as a town that loves its beer; even in the first decade of the 20th Century there were already many small breweries along with the saloons in the Portland business district, and along its busy waterfront – so there was a great demand for hops.

Brewers use hops to flavor and preserve their beer; and before long many fields in the Willamette Valley were devoted to growing hops. Entire families

– men, women, and children – were involved in the seasonal harvesting of hops, and many of those people lived in the Oak Grove area. The Oregon City Enterprise announced in 1911 that "a great many of the people in Oak Grove went to the hops fields during late August and September". Oregon pioneer John Risley grew hops on his farm just north of Oak Grove, and he relied on local families to provide the necessary labor to harvest his crops. Members of the Oak Grove Business Association at that time were even strongly suggesting that the teachers at the Oak Grove School should have a mandatory class dedicated to agriculture, so that students could be better prepared for such a career after graduating from 8th grade.

While agriculture played an important part in the economy of Oak Grove, I learned that the pride of the community over a century ago was the Oak Grove Girls' Band. The band was formed in the summer of 1910 by L.E. Armstrong, and it involved a lot of chaperoning by parents and friends of the girls, because of the many music venues where they played. Seventeen girls between the ages of seven and fifteen made up the group.

Jack Warren served as a volunteer talent agent, and the Oak Grove Girls' Band dressed in bright blue uniforms with white piping – playing in many high-profile regional events, such as the Portland Rose Festival, the Multnomah County Fair, and local holiday celebrations in Oak Grove. They were also a regular attraction at the Clackamas County Fair in Canby, often performing three times a day on stage.

The predominant modes of transportation in the early 1910s were with horse and wagon, on a boat down the Willamette River, or by street car, so collecting the funds and supervising the seventeen excitable girls in the band was quite a job. The Girls Band traveled as far as Washougal, Washington, for the Fourth of

July celebration there in 1911. They also performed during the peak summer season at Oaks Amusement Park in Sellwood, and they ordered a special trolley car that took them to the Clackamas and Multnomah County Fair in Gresham. The Oak Grove Girls' Band lasted only four years, but it continued to be something the community was proud of long after it had disbanded.

One of Oak Grove's well-to-do merchants was Oscar Wissinger. In 1893, with a partner, Oscar operated Gray and Wissinger General Merchandise at the corner of Main and Washington in Milwaukie. The co-owners negotiated a contract with the Eastside Railway Company to set up a waiting room at the front of their store, where people would gather to travel on the streetcar. The store was also used as a temporary Post Office. Using ads in local newspapers to increase sales, Gary and Wissinger proclaimed the availability of a new line of straw boater's hats – a popular men's hat at that time, otherwise found only in Portland's downtown department stores.

By 1902, Wissinger had made the now-renamed Milwaukie Mercantile Company a household name, re-establishing the store in one of Milwaukie's largest buildings. The upper floor was used for lodging, and a kitchen and dining room were added up there later so tenants could prepare meals.

Meantime, patrons downstairs could buy dry goods like shoes, rubber boots, coats and hats, vests, and underwear – all the way over to hardware like stoves, metal pipes, and heaters for the home. Other merchandise included an unfamiliar lady's garment called Queenswear, and nostrums like Ballard's Horehound Syrup and Cough Drops.

So what's the connection of this store to Oak Grove? Well, Mr. Wissinger expanded his operation to Oak Grove, purchasing a store and a home on Center Avenue in 1906. He appointed his longtime friend

and associate George Miller as manager of the Oak Grove store, and provided living quarters for the Miller family.

In the 1900's merchants were still delivering goods mostly by horse and wagon. Boys were hired to scour the neighborhood on horseback, taking orders for supplies and groceries from customers. By noon they returned for lunch and to fill the orders they'd taken, and then were back on the road to deliver the products to their customers before the evening set in.

Managers like George Miller were kept busy picking up eggs, produce, and other dairy products at farms nearby. Milk and dairy items often arrived by Eastside Streetcar, but store owners and managers were constantly looking for new products not offered by competitors to sell in their stores.

In 1907 The Home Telephone Company began placing telephone poles in the district, and opened an office in Oak Grove offering the amazing new telephone service, so that residents could communicate instantly with the outside world.

Because of its distance away from a major highway, and having to rely on the streetcar as the only way to deliver passengers and supplies, the growth of the Oak Grove area was slow. Along the commercial district, merchants came and went, some not having enough customers to sustain their businesses. But those who chose to stay for the long haul made a name for themselves, and contributed to prosperity of the community.

As the years passed, Oak Grove started to become known in the region as a desirable and thriving community – but, alas, the citizens of Oak Grove were just about to face their most challenging and darkest days, from a danger that most residents constantly feared in the early 1900s.

We will see next month, in the November issue of THE BEE, just what this danger was, and how the merchants and the people of Oak Grove confronted it.

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## OAK LODGE HISTORIANS tell the stories of early Oak Grove

By DANA BECK  
Special to THE BEE

In appreciation of the City of Milwaukie's Leeding Library having volunteered to store and preserve the microfilmed records of all the copies of THE BEE that still exist, going back to its beginnings in 1906 – and keeping them open to everyone in the library, with a microfilm printer available to reproduce any pages that might be sought after by visitors – the writers of the historical stories in THE BEE have agreed to expand their area of influence southward to include occasional articles about the history of Milwaukie and the surrounding towns and places.

It's really not much of a stretch, or even anything new – because the history of that area is intimately interconnected with the history of Inner Southeast Portland, as our past articles have shown! In fact, for a year in its early history, THE BEE moved over the county line to Milwaukie, and attempted to serve that community, before deciding to move back to Southeast Portland to stay.

So, my story in this issue and next offers a brief history of the community of Oak Grove, just south of the City of Milwaukie. Many from Southeast visit that community regularly to shop at the Oak Grove Fred Meyer, or to pick up some Voodoo Doughnuts.

The annual summertime Oak Grove Festival is an entertaining event drawing hundreds of spectators to visit the local businesses along Oak Grove Boulevard. In June of this year, it included magic shows, balloon animals, face painting, information booths, and plenty of food carts and live music for all to enjoy. Even a ukulele group was there – to perform a variety of tunes on the center stage. But what caught my eye, while visiting the Festival this year, was a large canopied booth for "The Oak Lodge History Detectives".

That proved to be a group of volunteers who've been gathering photos and news stories as part of their research into the history of Oak Grove. I stopped in to talk with them, and found these colleagues ready to share

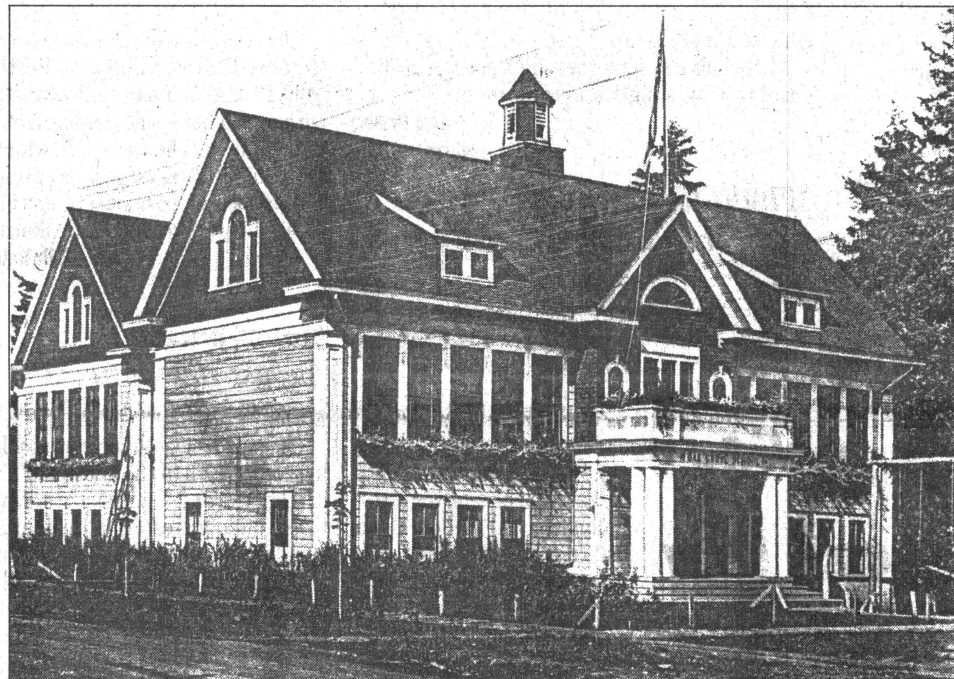


This 1912 photo shows the "Oak Grove Girls Band" in front of the streetcar waiting room on Railroad Avenue in Oak Grove. They were possibly waiting for the streetcar to take them to their next engagement. Formed in the summer of 1910, the young ladies performed for the next four years at some of Portland's top events – including appearances at Oaks Park and Portland's Rose Festival.

COURTESY OF OAK LODGE HISTORY DETECTIVES

the largely unknown history of this community. It was there that I met one of the founders of the Oak Grove History Detectives, Michael Schmeer. As a history buff, I couldn't pass up the chance to talk with one of the historical experts in that community, and to learn more about Oak Grove.

For those who don't know, the Oak Grove commercial district is about two and a half miles south of the town of Milwaukie and six miles north of Oregon City, between River Road and McLoughlin Boulevard. Its "city center" consists of a four-block area along Oak Grove Boulevard where you'll find an assortment of merchants – from the popular Awakening Coffee and Tap House, and McQueen's Bar and Grill, as well as a tattoo parlor, barber shop, hair salon,



COURTESY OF OAK LODGE HISTORY DETECTIVES

In 1903 it was reported by local newspapers that Oak Grove's population had more than doubled, and parents were concerned about the over-crowding of students at Concord School, so they lobbied State Officials for their own schoolhouse. By 1904 the Oak Grove School was accepting students. This photo appears to have been taken when the school was enlarged. It was located on today's Oak Grove Boulevard, between Lee and Cedar Avenues.

and various auto services and small businesses. A large section along the north side of the street is reserved for the New Urban High School – and Oak Grove Daycare and Preschool is just across the street.

The Oak Grove business district ends to the east at Rupert Drive, where the Methodist Church has been since its inception in 1909. At that point, Oak Grove Boulevard jogs south and then eastward to McLoughlin Boulevard – where you will find that large Oak Grove Fred Meyer Shopping Center.

But the four-block heart of Oak Grove's commercial district is definitely one of the smaller such districts in the state, but it makes up for it by its rich and romantic history – which has been unearthed, and is now chronicled by the Oak Lodge History Detectives.

Who exactly are these people?

Mike Schmeer certainly has a firm connection to Oak Grove – he was born there, and attended Concord Grade School until his parents moved the family to Seattle in 1957. His dad, deciding to pass up on helping to run his father's hardware store in North Portland, had landed a job with Boeing.

Once Mike graduated from high school, he attended the University of Washington, earning a degree in Forest

Management in 1971. But, in the back of his mind, his roots were telling him to return to Oak Grove – and, also, his grandmother, Gladys Schmeer, said she intended to have him inherit her home.

Mike told me that his grandparents, Roy Schmeer and Gladys, once lived in Southeast Portland, while they owned and operated the Piedmont Hardware store in North Portland. Deciding to find a quiet and peaceful neighborhood to spend their remaining years, the Schmeers eventually bought a craftsman-style house along S.E. Oatfield Road in Oak Grove. Mike found, when he'd eventually inherited that house, that it was filled with Clackamas History.

The house was built in 1922 by Philip Oatfield. Philip

Oatfield's father, Michael Oatfield, arrived in Portland in 1861, and purchased 600 acres of land from the Kellogg family – one of the original Donation Land Claim owners in Oregon. Yes, as you might have guessed, Oatfield Road was later named after the family.

So, following his graduation from the University of Washington, Mike returned to Oak Grove to be near his grandmother Gladys (Roy had died in 1966), and to search for a job. His first one was at a Portland nursery until 1975, when Mike accepted a position with the Portland General Electric Company in their landscape department. Within five years Mike was promoted to Transmission Forester at PGE, as a vegetation manager. He was responsible for keeping the 600 miles of transmission lines clear of underbrush and trees. He was also the supervisor of the spray department. He retired in 2005.

In 2006 Mike met Oak Grove resident Pat Kennedy, who was making an inventory of heritage trees that were in the area. Putting his forestry degree to work, he offered to help Pat measure the circumferences of these trees, and began recording them for future reference. It was during these inventorying walks around the neighborhood that they both found they had more in common than just trees – but also had a curiosity of the old days when Oak Grove had a thriving business district.

They gathered with others who were interested, and the "Oak Lodge History Detectives" group was established. Neighbors, friends, and anyone interested, gather monthly to discuss and share information, as well as to show photos of Oak Grove to preserve for future generations.

So, with that lengthy preamble, and with the help of Mike and his band of roving detectives, here is a brief history of the place called Oak Grove. . .

In the late 1800s, streetcar lines were turning outlying areas of Portland into new neighborhoods. An interurban line, built in sections starting south from Golf Junction in Sellwood and eventually reaching downtown Oregon City, was completed by 1893. Waystations along the first section reaching Oak Grove included Milwaukie, Island Station, Lakewood, Evergreen, Silver Springs, Torbank, Courtney, and a small stop called Saint Theresa. The Oak Grove Waiting Room and Ticket Office was located on the west side of Railroad Avenue (Arista Avenue) by Central Avenue (Oak Grove Boulevard), but was listed on the railway line as Creighton Station.

The Creighton Post Office and Creighton Station were named after one of the area's original pioneers, Susan Creighton – but the people who lived in the area prevailed on Eastside Railway officials to change the name of both the Post Office and the streetcar stop to reflect the name of the community, Oak Grove, by 1907.

But let's go back much further than that. Families living on the outskirts of Milwaukie during the early years sent their children to Milwaukie School, until Orville Risley stepped in. The incomparable Orville Risley wanted to ensure that children growing up in the countryside south of Milwaukie had the same educational opportunities as the children attending school in Milwaukie and Oregon City. Both towns were fairly distant for these children to reach, so Risley rallied the citizens to establish a local school on September 6th, 1856.

This small, one-room log cabin schoolhouse was erected along today's River Road at Laurelwood Drive. As stated in the chronological history of Concord School by Michael Schmeer, fifteen students attended in the first school year – at what was aptly called "The Little Log School".

Ten years later, a new school was built further south on

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