

CHICAGO STATE UNIVERSITY

Hickory Hills: Rural Area
to Urban Fringe, 1926-1976
Cook County, Illinois

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in
Geography 441
Seminar in Human Geography

by
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"Welcome to beautiful Hickory Hills, a progressive city of beautiful homes, churches, spacious parks and fine modern public and parochial schools. The growing community of Hickory Hills, in its scenic hills setting, is a nice place to live."

Thomas Watson
Former Mayor of
Hickory Hills

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INTRODUCTION

Hickory Hills just celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary as an incorporated community. A strange fact, when you consider the original community, dubbed Hickory Heights, was planned over fifty years ago. It was not just a vision of the builder Elmore, but a reality, with land subdivided and concrete sidewalks laid. But the world economy came crashing down on that dream, leaving only sidewalks in place, with no streets, houses or people. A mute testimony of one man's plan to create another Beverly Hills.

A decade passed and a realtor placed an ad in the Chicago Tribune, "Lots \$99, \$10 down and \$1 a month." The community would never be another Beverly Hills. Times had changed. People who couldn't afford a down payment on a house, could somehow manage to scrape together the needed cash and build their own home. Homes were built, but they certainly were not "peas in a pod." The builder's imagination prevailed and so did the spirit of those hardy "pioneers" as they called themselves.

Many of these individuals were from the south side of Chicago and accustomed to such amenities as running water and indoor plumbing. They soon discovered the meaning of the terms "cistern," "septic field," and "conservation of water."

Purpose of Study

This paper is an attempt to trace those changes which led to the transition of a farming area into an urban community.

Original settlement of the area from 1834 to 1850 will be investigated, along with later recreational development between 1910 and 1926. The

failure of the first subdivision and its ultimate reawakening will be discussed. Reasons for the eventual forming of a municipality in 1951, though the population was under four hundred, will be investigated. An overview of Hickory Hills' current status and a projection into its future will be examined.

Topography of Area

Hickory Hills is underlaid with middle Silurian Niagaran limestone over which are considerable glacial deposits to the west and former lake bottom to the east. The moraines form gently rolling hills and the lake bottom flat and productive farmland.

The oldest shore-line of glacial Lake Chicago runs along the east slope of the terminal moraine on which Hickory Hills is built. The lake found two outlets; to the north, the

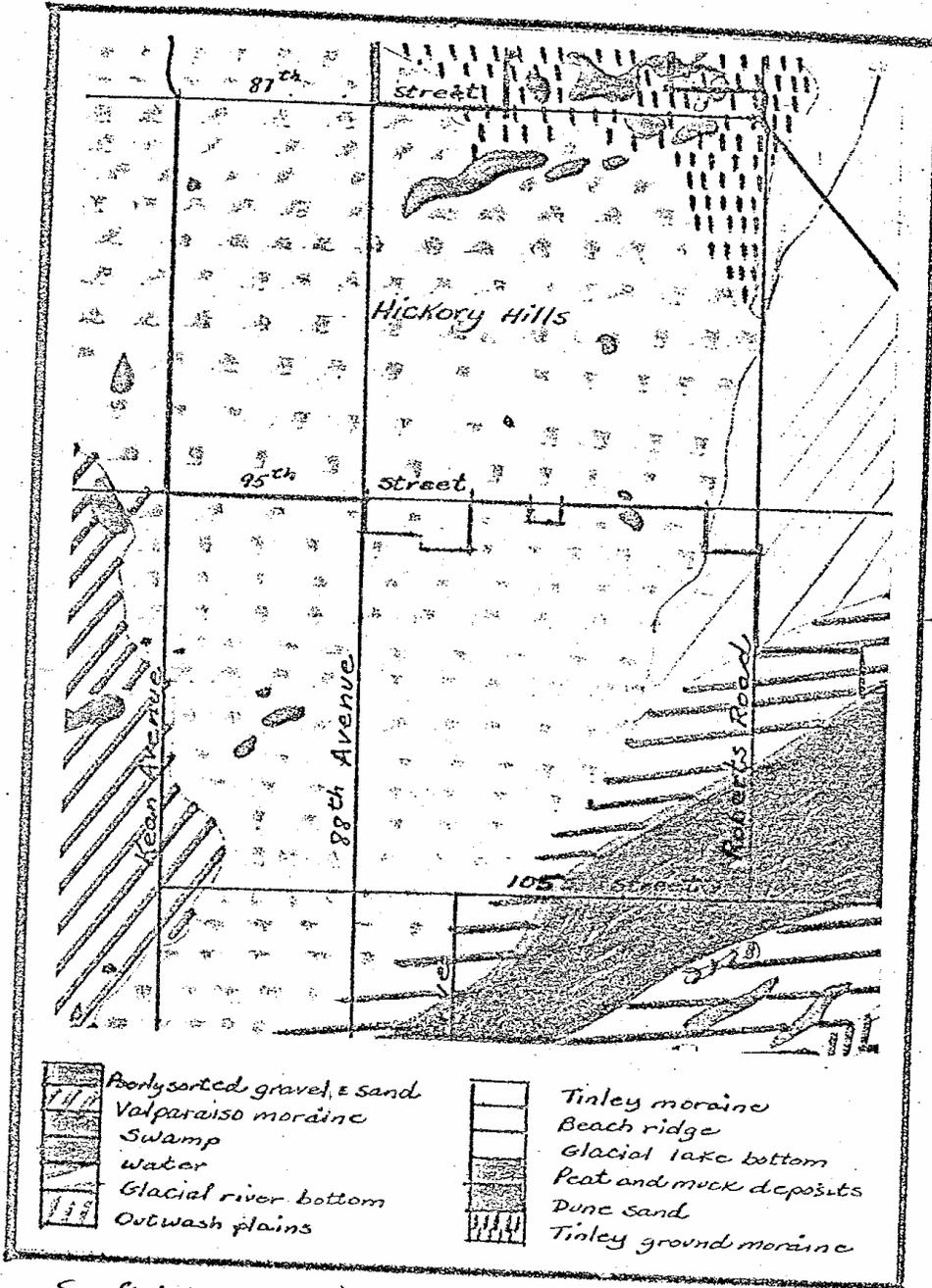


Fig. 1. Oak-hickory climax forest, Hidden Pond, Forest Preserve District, Illinois

Des Plaines River valley and the Sag valley to the south, through which glacial melt water found its way to the Mississippi River.

GREEN HILLS

MAP 2



Surficial Geology of Hickory Hills Area

This section of land was cut off from the rest of the Valparaiso Moraine twelve thousand years ago leaving an island geologists call Mount Forest Island.¹

An oak-hickory climax forest once covered most of the region and remnants of it still persist on some of the large home sites. The Forest Preserve District has purchased sizable portions of land within Palos Township, thus saving the forest.

Settlement Between 1650 and 1800

The Miami tribes settled this area after about 1650 followed by the Potawatomi in the 1800's.

Food supplies must have been abundant, swampland alone providing much of the necessary food, such as cat tails, waterfowl, and fish. The forests harbored plentiful plant and animal life which would support fairly large groups of people.

Fresh water springs abound in the area and would assure a settlement of adequate water throughout the year.

Mosquitos and malaria, the dominant disease in Illinois in the 1780's, must have made life miserable in an otherwise idyllic locality. Malaria peaked in the 1870's and continued to plague the inhabitants of Northern Illinois until 1890.²

Indians were forced, by treaty agreement in 1833, to leave their lands between Lake Michigan and the Mississippi River. Now settlers came to Illinois without fear of Indians.

¹W. J. Beecher, "Lake Michigan's Ancient Beaches," Science Notes (Chicago: Chicago Academy of Sciences, [1960]), p.1.

²Virginia S. Eifert, The Story of Illinois, Indian and Pioneer (Springfield: Illinois State Museum, 1969), p.5.

Mississippi River by way of the Illinois River. In 1827, Congress granted Illinois 285,629 acres along the ninety-seven mile route of the proposed Illinois-Michigan Canal.⁶

The Irish played a key role in the building of this canal, a portion of which is on the northwest border of Palos Township. Some of the families purchased farmsites for \$1.25 an acre and settled in the Palos-Hickory area.

The dominant migrant group, however, was German. Schools were taught and church sermons were delivered in German.

First School District

The Palos School District Number 4 was formed just prior to 1858. In

the annual re-
port of County
Superintendent
Albert G. Lane,
(1878 to 1884)
an inventory
of school lots
of Cook County
shows that a
lot in Section
II of Township

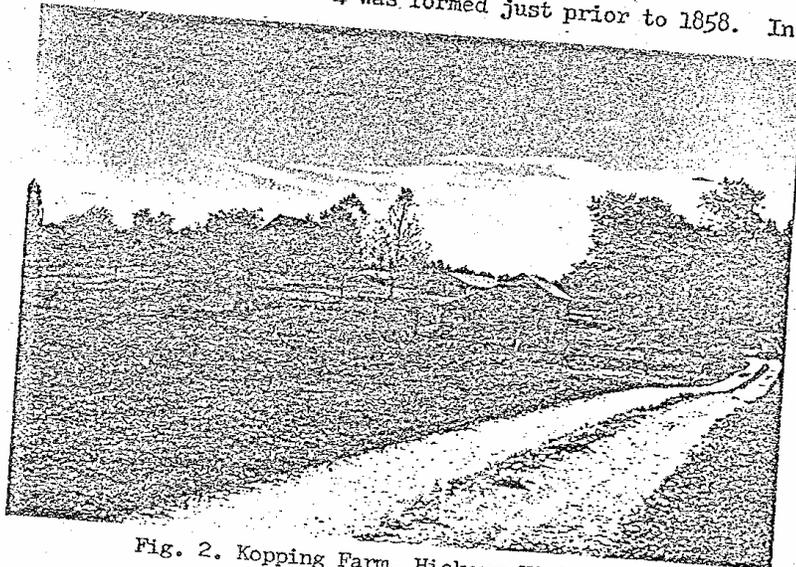


Fig. 2. Kopping Farm, Hickory Hills, Illinois

37, Range 12, of one acre in size, was deeded in 1879 to the trustees of Palos Township by Mr. Edward O'Connell and wife. This is the site on which the ninety-fifth street building now stands. The value of the acre was shown as \$100.

⁶Cook County Committee, Illinois Sesquicentennial, The Story of Dan Cook, (Cook County, 1968) p. 8.

A one-room frame school was built on this site in about 1883. A well and good spring provided water for the school.

In 1910, about fifty pupils were in attendance. The young woman who taught the class received \$600 a year plus other assistance. The enrollment dropped in subsequent years and remained between 25-30 pupils until the spring of 1937.⁷ The drop in school enrollment after 1910 coincides with large purchases of land by the Forest Preserve District and farms sold off to Charles E. Coey.

Recreational Development

Charles Coey had a colorful sports career, which included hot-air ballooning. He proved also to be the entrepreneur of the spectacular.

Near one of the many springs in the region he built a complex of large Spanish styled brick buildings with tiled roofs and floors.

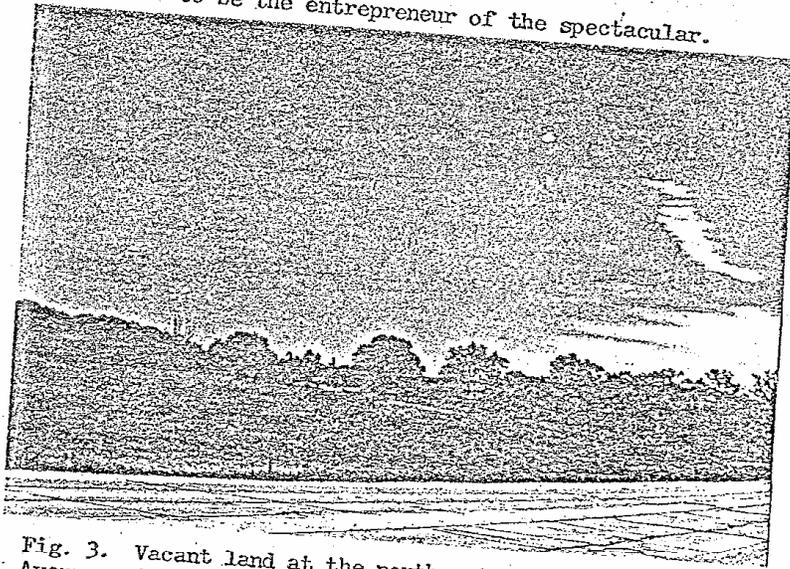


Fig. 3. Vacant land at the northeast corner of Kean Avenue and Ninety-fifth Street. The Sabre Room Restaurant (former Dynell Springs) to the right.

⁷Betty Charles, "A History of Our District," 1974, North Palos School District 117, Hickory Hills, Illinois

Dynell Springs lured people away from the city and out into the country to see the "rose colored horse" (white roses, of course), and the caged bears.

He sold spring water, which revitalized the spirit and emptied the pocketbook, for one dollar a gallon.

The Blackbear, Hickory Hills, and Walnut Hills golf courses were built between 1910 and 1920.

Many stables were located along the east side of Kean Avenue to the north and south of Ninety-fifth Street. An ideal location, with Forest Preserve and bridle paths

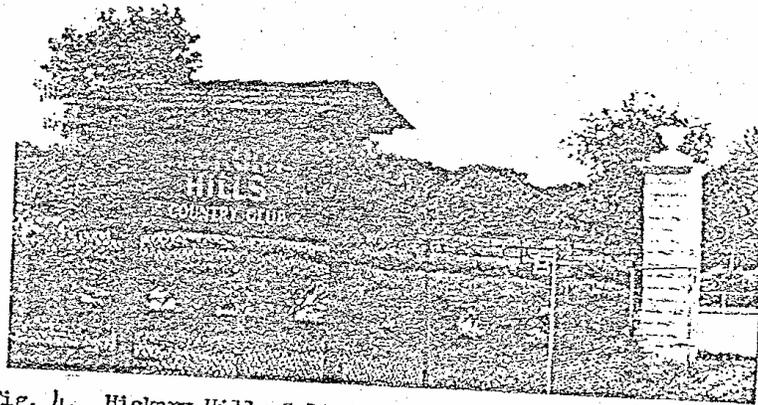


Fig. 4. Hickory Hills Golf Course, presently unincorporated.

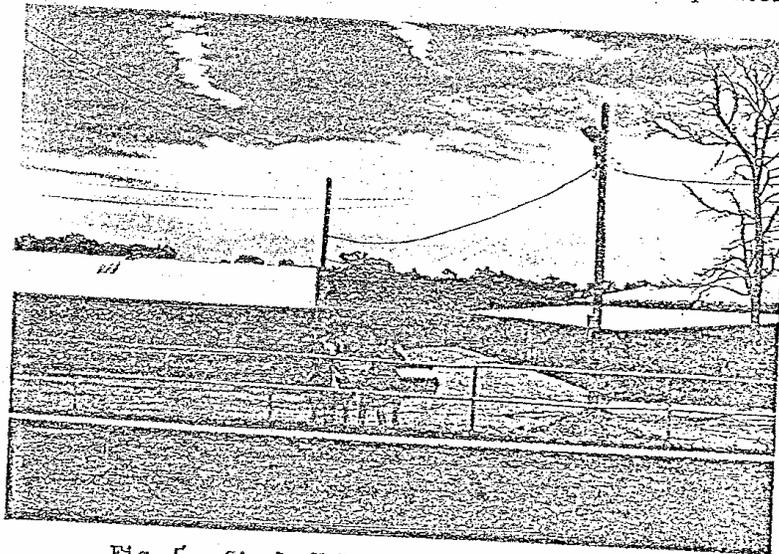


Fig. 5. Circle H Ranch, Hickory Hills, Illinois

GREEN HILLS
PUBLIC

on the west side of the road. Numerous taverns sprung up on either side of Ninety-fifth Street between Kean Avenue and Eighty-fifth Court and on Kean Avenue north of Eighty-seventh Street in the years between 1910 and 1920.

Since the area was only sparsely inhabited, and the owners had "clout," the taverns replete with illicit activities, such as prostitution, cock fighting, dog fights, and gambling, did not come under local jurisdiction.⁸

Kean Avenue was also a favorite "dumping off" spot for Chicago gangsters. In 1949, the bullet-riddled body of a Chicago hoodlum was found in the Forest Preserve west of Kean Avenue.⁹

The former Old Bohemian Club, a purported nudist colony during the 1930's was located in the present interior of Hickory Hills, at Ninety-first Street and Eighty-third Avenue.

The first subdivision, Hickory Heights, was platted in the mid 1920's. Elmore purchased the farmland for one thousand dollars an acre from Kelso. The land was bordered by Roberts Road on the east and Eighty-fourth Avenue on the west. Its boundary to the north was Ninety-third Street and Ninety-fifth Street on the south.

The lots were approximately 50' x 132', laid out in city blocks, with concrete sidewalks but no roads, water, sewage system or public utilities. The prices ranged between \$795 for the least expensive 50' x 132' lot to \$4,400 for a 25' x 132' lot.¹⁰

⁸ Interview with August DeKeyser, 1937 resident of Hickory Hills, Illinois, 12 February 1976.

⁹ The author of this paper and two young friends found the murder weapon in a ditch at 92nd and Cork Avenue.

¹⁰ Interview, DeKeyser.

GREEN HILLS

Unfortunately for Elmore, but fortunately for future buyers, since the lots were too small to accommodate septic fields or adequately pure water, the market crashed and no lots were sold.

Post-Depression Population Growth

The land was either purchased or picked up for back taxes in 1936 by the Frank DeLugach Real Estate Company. He advertised in the September 1936 Chicago Tribune, "Lots \$99. - 95th and Western." The salesman then drove prospective buyers seven miles west to the roadless subdivision.

The salesman had a catalog of house styles from which the buyer could choose, if he could pay in cash. Federal Housing Authority and the State Bank of Clearing would not approve loans in this area. As a result, many homes were built piece meal with the owner's imagination being substituted for sound architecture.¹¹

School enrollment reflected the sale of land. When school opened in the fall of 1937, thirty-two pupils were in attendance in the one-room building. In the spring of 1938,

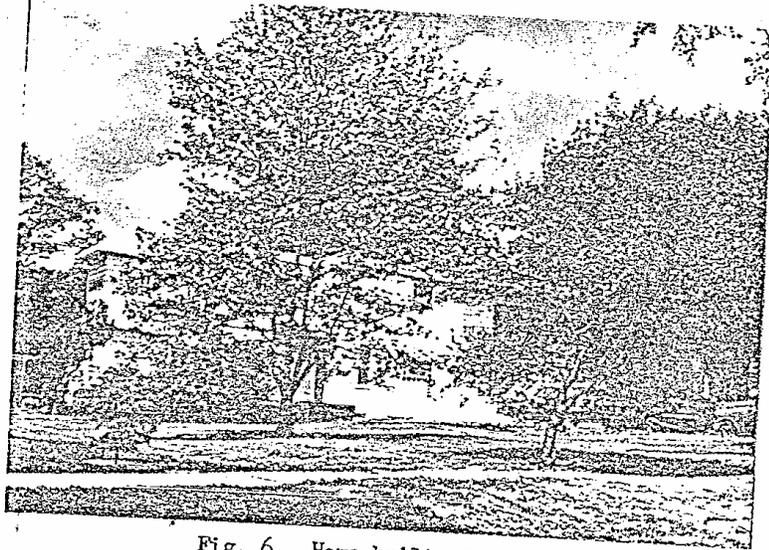


Fig. 6. Home built circa 1939

¹¹ Ibid.

there were 49 pupils. The overcrowded situation became steadily more critical. In the fall of 1938, two teachers were employed. The old frame building was partitioned to provide two rooms.

The school board applied for and received a federal grant, which in addition to a bond issue of \$29,000, was sufficient to construct the Ninety-fifth Street School.



Fig. 7. North Palos, District 117, Administration Building

A brick struc-

ture large enough to eventually contain four classrooms upstairs and four classrooms downstairs was built in 1938 by the Public Works Administration.

The school opened in 1939 with three teachers and 135 students. The continued rise in enrollment made it necessary to create new classrooms within the building. During the 1939 to 1942 interval, there was a six hundred percent increase in student enrollment with only a ten percent increase in assessed evaluation of property. North Palos School had to resort to double shifts to accommodate the eight hundred and ten pupils. The adjoining 1883 frame school building was pressed into use.¹²

¹²Charles, "A History of Our District."

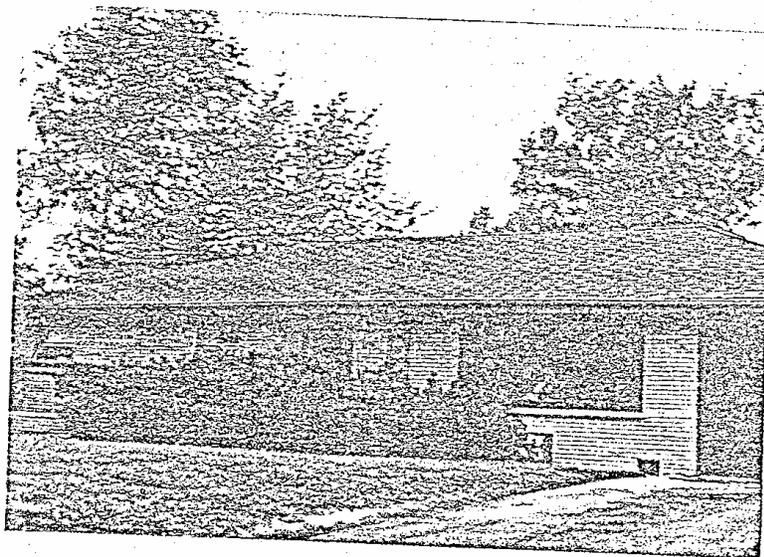


Fig. 8. Homes built on one-half acre lots circa 1950.

The expansion of the Clearing Industrial District, the Ford and Studebaker plants, and the formation of Argonne Laboratories, during World War II, had a minimal effect on population growth within Hickory Hills, but did affect School District 117.¹³

Black Bear Golf Course had closed in the early 1940's and was now being sold ten years later, along with Dynell Springs¹⁴ to help pay for back taxes. The land was subdivided into half-acre homesites, oaks were felled, gravel roads put in, and homes soon dotted the landscape.

Village Incorporation

Continued pressure on the already burdened school district, along with the "land-grab" techniques of our newly incorporated northeastern neighbor, Bridgeview, the need for zoning regulations and a stronger tax base caused some concerned citizens to fight for incorporation.

The school district's major source of revenue was property tax. Most of the students attending North Palos School came from Palos Hills where some homes were not on the tax roles and property assessments were so low they did not cover the cost of educating their children.

Bridgeview was guilty of strip annexation along Harlem Avenue crossing the Tri-State Tollway and Ninety-fifth street to the south and taking the "Hot point" property which was zoned light industrial.¹⁵

¹³School District 117 includes part of Bridgeview.

¹⁴Charles E. Coey received a contract from the government, during World War II, to make baskets for hot air balloons. The wicker baskets were secretly made in one of the back buildings of Dynell Springs.

¹⁵A legal battle ensued between Hickory Hills and Bridgeview over the "Hot Point Property." The Bridgeview annex was upheld by Judge Adamowski in July 1960.

Dr. Streysman "spear-headed" the group in 1950 who wanted to incorporate Hickory Hills into a village. But there were many opponents, political groups who wanted to maintain control, older settlers (families who lived in the area prior to 1900), did not want the new people (after 1925) running their area, poor people fearful of an increase in tax and independents who wanted the freedom to build the type of home they chose to construct, fought incorporation.

The fight for incorporation caused strong divisions within the village even after approval in the fall of 1951.

Hickory Hills was legally a village. The fourth ordinance of the governing body was that a census should be taken. Results--three hundred and ninety six people lived within the incorporate limits of Hickory Hills.¹⁶

The following five years was one of unprecedented growth in Hickory Hills. The population more than quadrupled between the years 1951 and 1956. The



Fig. 9. Subdivision within Hickory Hills.

¹⁶Hickory Hills, IL., Log of Village Meetings (1951), Sec. 1.1.

a temporary water line from Justice-Millow Springs was installed to relieve the water shortage. The pipe carrying Chicago water, which supplemented the deep well supply, was made permanent in 1968.

Lack of water created hardships and political unrest in the community. Some high areas of the

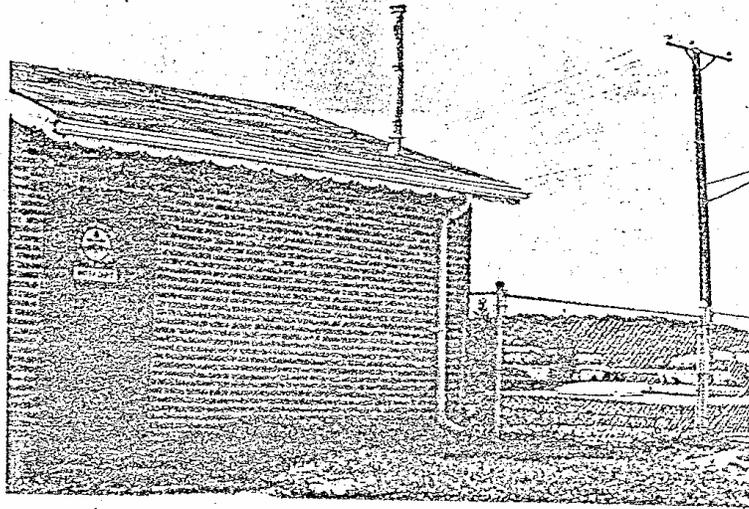


Fig. 10. Pumping Station, Hickory Hills.

town lacked water for spans of several days, while people in lower areas were wasting water on their lawns. During this time, 1966, the village government was changed to a city form of government and a new mayor was elected.¹⁹

Sewer systems, paved and lighted roads, business and apartment buildings changed the face of the community. Accompanying this change, was a stable government with fewer political scandals and a leveling off of the population growth at about fourteen thousand people.

Hickory Hills Today

The area is primarily residential with businesses concentrated along the arterial streets of Roberts Road, Ninety-fifth Street, and Eighty-seventh

¹⁹City of Hickory Hills, Yearbook II, 1975-1976 (Hickory Hills, Illinois, 1976), p. 9.

Street. There are four shopping areas, numerous large and small restaurants banking facilities, a Sears Roebuck service center, medical and dental offices and a Bell Telephone office building.

Despite the bustling business areas and glittering night life, Hickory Hills has not lost its rural charm. It

still has several farms, open pasture land and Forest Preserve on its southern and western boundaries. The chiming bells of Poor Clares Monastery add a note of serenity to the community.

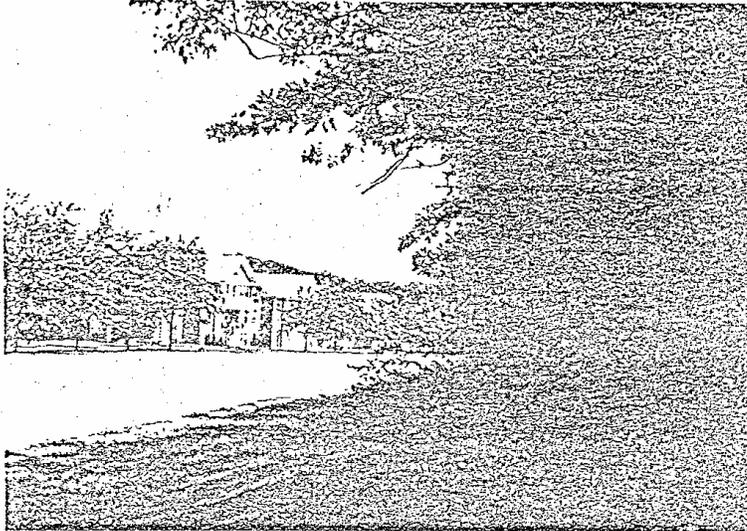


Fig. 11. Apartment buildings on Ninety-Fifth Street, Hickory Hills

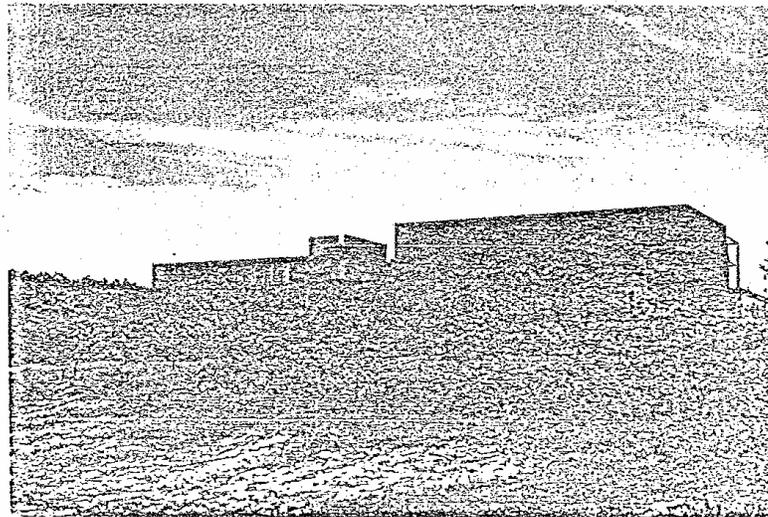


Fig. 12. Poor Clares Monastery, completed in June 1958. (3)

GREEN HILLS

Political problems and the need for additional revenue are beginning to plague the city once again. A new municipal building is needed to replace the collection of temporary buildings presently located at Ninety-fifth Street and Eighty-sixth Avenue. Hopefully, the new building will be placed on an interior street, since the temporary buildings are located on a prime business corner.

The police department shares the tiny city hall and somehow manages to operate efficiently from its cramped quarters. If a

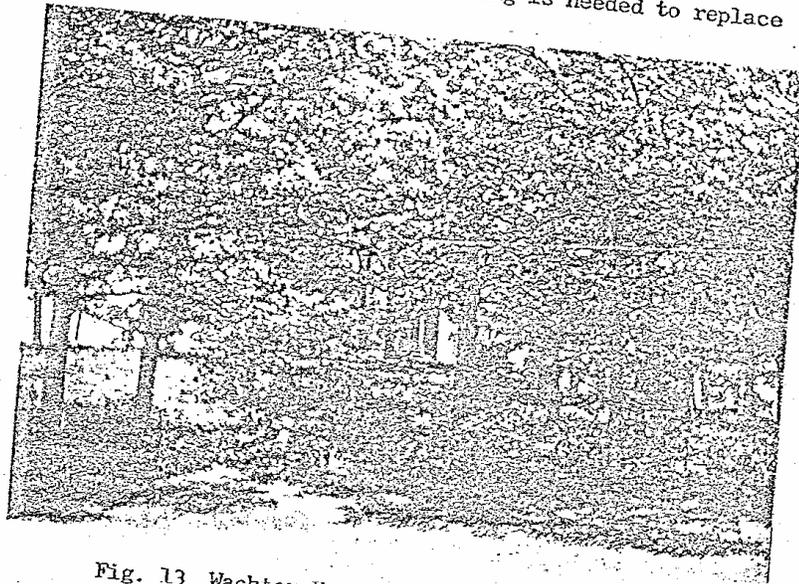


Fig. 13 Wachter Farm, Ninety-first and Kean



Fig. 14. Hickory Hills Municipal Buildings

suspect needs to be retained, they must handcuff him to a file cabinet!²⁰

The most successful and prosperous shopping area in the city was envisioned by the zoning board in the 1950s. The Hill Creek Shopping Center was built in 1973 and draws seventy percent of its business from outside of Hickory Hills.²¹

Future of
Hickory Hills.

Popu-
lation expan-
sion will not
have the ex-
plosive nature
of the later
1950s and 1960s.

It will be
limited by the

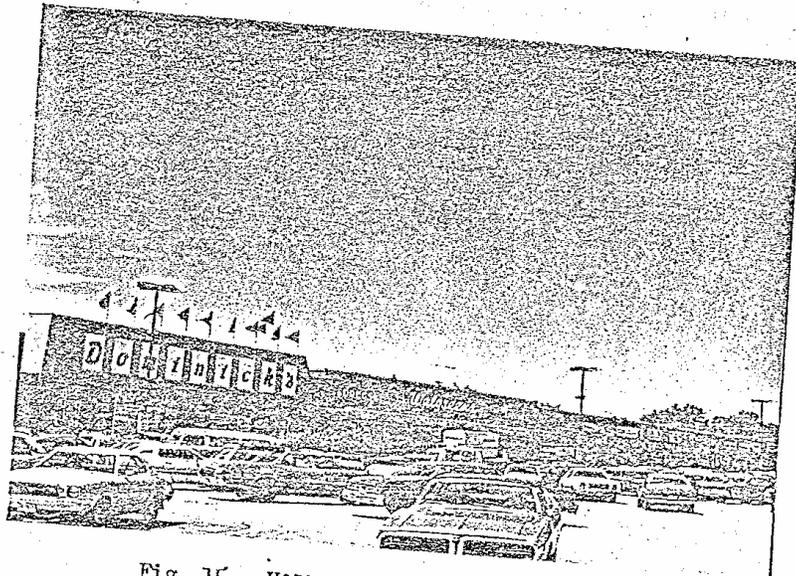


Fig. 15. Hill Creek Shopping Center

availability of vacant land. There are four small farms and one pasture which could be subdivided. Hickory Hills Golf Course is presently unincorporated; if this land is sold and subdivided, an annexation battle between Palos Hills and Hickory Hills will surely ensue.

Business will continue to proliferate along Ninety-fifth Street and along Roberts Road.

²⁰ Interview with Stephan Flowers, Mayor of Hickory Hills, Illinois, 22 March 1976.

²¹ Note results of survey conducted by Susan Venezia on page 24 of this paper.

GRAPH 2

SURVEY OF 944 VEHICLE REGISTRATIONS
AT HILL CREEK SHOPPING CENTER, MAY 1976*

<u>Town</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percentage of Total</u>
Hickory Hills.	287	30.4
Palos Hills.	244	25.8
Oak Lawn	61	6.4
Chicago.	57	6.0
Justice	53	5.6
Barbank	26	2.8
Bridgeview	23	2.4
Worth.	18	1.9
Willow Springs	17	1.8
Chicago Ridge.	14	1.5
Alsip.	12	1.3
Cook County	12	1.3
Evergreen Park.	11	1.2
Deerfield.	6	.6
Summit	6	.6
Park Forest.	6	.6
All others with less than .6% from Northern Illinois	58	6.1
Out of State	12	1.3

*This survey does not take into account those shoppers who walk or ride a bike to Hill Creek Shopping Center

TABLE 1

POPULATION OF HICKORY HILLS, 1951-1974

1951	-	396
1953	-	520
1956	-	1,261
1960	-	2,707
1965	-	6,946
1968	-	11,564
1970	-	13,176
1974	-	13,951

TABLE 2

POPULATION CHANGES FOR SELECTED TOWNS
IN NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS, 1950-1970

Place	1970	1960	1950	1960-1970 Change	
				Number	Percent
Hickory Hills	13,176	2,707	---	10,469	386.7
Palos Hills .	6,629	3,766	---	2,863	76.0
Palos Park. .	3,297	2,169	854	1,127	52.0
Oak Lawn. . .	60,305	27,471	8,751	32,835	119.5
Justice . . .	9,473	2,803	854	6,670	238.0
Willow Springs	3,318	2,348	1,314	970	41.3
Bridgeview. .	12,522	7,334	1,393	5,188	70.7
Chicago Ridge	9,187	5,748	888	3,439	59.8
Palos Heights	9,915	3,775	---	6,140	162.6
Worth	11,999	8,196	1,472	3,803	46.4
Bedford Park.	583	737	651	-154	-20.9

TABLE 3

AREA, DENSITY, DISTANCE FROM LOOP AND
DATE OF INCORPORATION FOR SELECTED TOWNS
IN NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS, 1970

<u>Place</u>	<u>Area Sq. Miles</u>	<u>1970 Gross Density</u>	<u>Distance from Loop</u>	<u>Date of Incorporation</u>
Hickory Hills. . .	2.6	5067.7	18	1951
Palos Hills. . . .	4.3	1541.6	19	1959
Palos Park	1.7	1939.4	21	1914
Oak Lawn.	8.3	7265.7	14	1909
Justice	2.5	3789.2	16	1911
Willow Springs	2.9	1141.3	19	1892
Bridgeview	3.6	3478.3	16	1947
Chicago Ridge. . .	2.0	4593.5	17	1914
Palos Heights. . .	3.9	2542.3	21	1959
Worth.	2.3	5217.0	18	1914

TABLE 4

POPULATION MOBILITY OF RESIDENTS OF SELECTED
TOWNS WITH POPULATIONS OF 2500 AND OVER 1970 in
NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS, 1970

<u>Place</u>	<u>Same House</u>	<u>Same County</u>	<u>Same State</u>	<u>In USA</u>	<u>Abroad</u>	<u>Not Represented</u>
Hickory Hills	40.9	45.9	2.4	5.0	.8	4.6
Palos Hills . .	46.5	38.2	1.1	5.4	1.1	7.6
Palos Park . .	56.8	38.4	2.8	1.2	0.0	2.7
Oak Lawn	57.0	34.1	.9	2.4	.6	5.0
Justice	42.9	28.2	3.7	8.9	.9	15.4
Willow Springs	47.2	21.7	2.4	5.0	.3	4.6
Bridgeview . .	56.5	33.0	1.2	2.7	1.6	5.3
Chicago Ridge	65.6	30.1	.5	1.8	.3	1.7
Palos Heights	55.5	34.4	.6	4.2	.8	4.3
Worth	59.1	32.3	.4	3.4	1.7	3.1

TABLE 5

CHARACTERISTICS OF HOMEOWNER DWELLING UNITS
FOR SELECTED TOWNS IN NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS, 1970

Place	Units	Va- cancy Rate	Less Than \$15,000	\$15 - \$24,999	\$25 - \$49,999	Over \$50,000
Hickory Hills	2650	.3	74	712	1700	43
Palos Hills . .	1290	4.3	207	473	452	23
Palos Park . .	812	.2	11	94	454	240
Oak Lawn . . .	13500	.4	866	4772	6399	476
Justice. . . .	1691	.2	253	688	95	3
Willow Springs	693	1.6	81	310	242	7
Bridgeview . .	2464	.3	317	1500	505	3
Chicago Ridge	1874	.2	164	1145	382	3
Palos Heights	2383	1.0	20	380	1515	409
Worth.	2309	.1	193	1363	559	6

TABLE 6

HOUSING QUALITY AND AGE CHARACTERISTICS
FOR SELECTED TOWNS IN NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS, 1970

Place	Number of Units Built		
	After 1960	1950 1959	Before 1950
Hickory Hills	2888	639	195
Palos Hills	117	490	351
Palos Park	245	386	329
Oak Lawn	7616	5734	3413
Justice	2004	773	395
Willow Springs	353	352	378
Bridgeview	1545	1262	1885
Chicago Ridge	992	1203	253
Palos Heights	1098	943	469
Worth	1601	1647	331

TABLE 7

RACIAL MAKE-UP OF POPULATION
IN SELECTED TOWNS IN NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS, 1970

Place	White		Negro		Other		Spanish-American	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Hickory Hills	13,130	99.7	2	.0	44	.3	196	1.5
Palos Hills..	6,599	99.5	1	.0	29	.4	345	5.2
Palos Park. .	3,290	99.8	0	.0	7	.2	0	0.0
Oak Lawn. . .	60,119	99.7	6	.0	180	.3	640	1.1
Justice . . .	9,387	99.1	11	.1	75	.8	197	2.1
Willow Springs	3,301	99.5	1	.0	16	.5	0	0.0
Bridgeview. .	12,462	99.5	9	.1	51	.4	404	3.2
Chicago Ridge	9,174	99.9	0	.0	13	.1	144	1.6
Palos Heights	9,867	99.5	26	.3	22	.2	48	0.5
Worth	11,961	99.7	1	.0	37	.3	151	1.3

TABLE 8

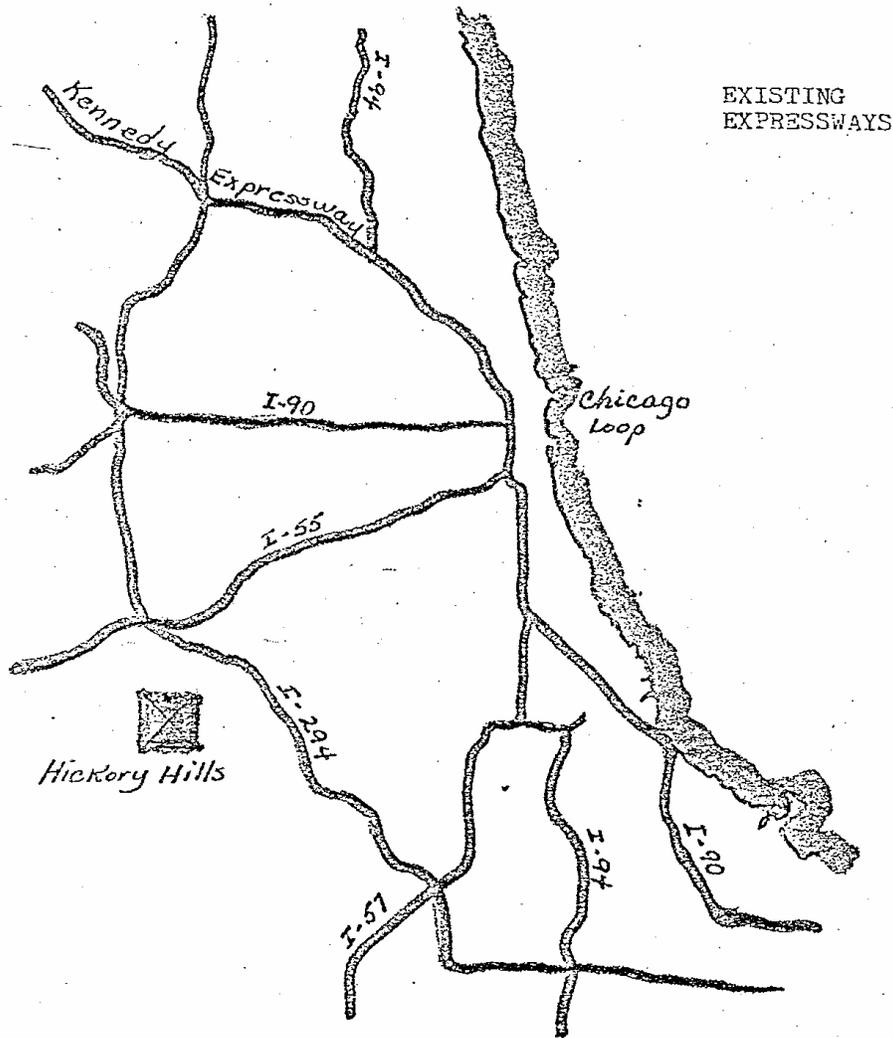
MEDIAN FAMILY INCOME FOR FAMILIES
IN SELECTED TOWNS IN NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS, 1970

	Persons, Over 25 Median School Years	Median Family Income	Under \$7000	\$7- \$9999	\$10- \$14,999	Over \$15,000	Below Poverty Level	
							Number	Percent
Hickory Hills . . .	12.5	12,779	8.9%	17.3%	40.4%	33.4%	99	2.9
Palos Hills . . .	12.2	12,580	10.5	17.6	39.4	32.5	47	2.9
Palos Park . . .	12.6	18,762	9.7	4.4	22.0	63.8	25	2.9
Oak Lawn	12.2	13,824	10.7	12.4	35.4	41.5	380	2.6
Justice	12.2	11,745	12.6	20.4	39.9	27.0	90	3.5
Willow Springs . .	12.2	12,713	11.9	12.9	46.1	29.2	22	2.5
Bridgeview	12.0	11,910	12.1	19.2	45.9	22.7	104	3.3
Chicago Ridge . .	12.1	11,957	15.6	14.9	42.5	27.1	145	6.6
Palos Heights . .	12.6	17,082	6.6	8.8	26.9	57.7	38	1.6
Worth	12.1	12,514	11.7	17.2	39.9	31.2	84	2.7

TABLE 9

TOTAL AND PER CAPITA ASSESSED VALUATION AND TAX RATES
FOR SELECTED MUNICIPALITIES IN NORTHEASTERN ILLINOIS, 1970

Place	Total Assessed Valuation (000's)	Per Capita Valuation	Aggregate Tax Rate per \$100 Valuation		Municipal Tax Rate per \$100	Corporation Tax Rate per \$100	Municipal Tax Extension per Capita
			Min.	Max.			
Hickory Hills	\$41023	\$3113	5.746	7.230	.384	.234	11.96
Palos Hills	20796	3137	7.048	7.866	.406	.267	12.74
Palos Park	13091	3971	7.588	7.588	.404	.250	16.04
Oak Lawn	202818	3363	6.668	7.460	.902	.250	30.34
Justice	20234	2136	5.524	5.802	.440	.250	9.40
Willow Springs	12748	3482	6.174	7.180	.870	.250	33.42
Bridgeview	55769	4454	5.582	7.388	.678	.235	16.47
Chicago Ridge	34411	3746	6.398	7.154	.730	.246	27.34
Palos Heights	33558	3385	6.446	7.806	.622	.216	21.05
North	33817	2818	6.868	8.208	.652	.162	18.38
Bedford Park	146561	251391	5.186	6.898	.384	.250	965.34



EXISTING
EXPRESSWAYS

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