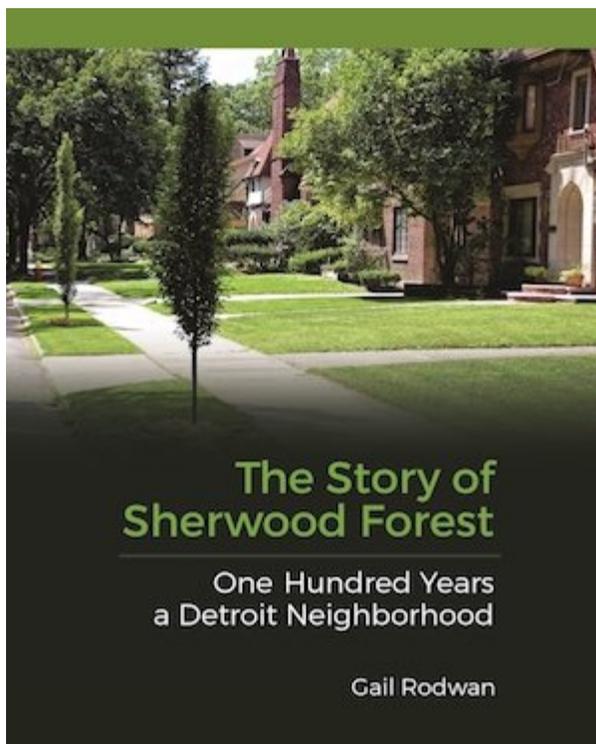




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## DETROIT PROPER: Detroit's Sherwood Forest neighborhood turns 100

Desiree Cooper



If there's one thing we Detroiters have learned over the past 50 years, it's that no one is coming to save us. A real Detroiter is someone who understands that to get something done, you have to do it yourself.

That DIY ethic is what gives the city its hardscrabble reputation, but it's also what gives Detroit neighborhoods their charm. That's what struck me most when reading Gail Rodwan's new book, *The Story of Sherwood Forest: One Hundred Years a Detroit Neighborhood*. The attorney and author took it upon herself to amass the history of the oft-overlooked enclave on the occasion of its centennial. In the end, it could have been the story of so many Detroit neighborhoods – all of which have had to patrol themselves, tend to common areas or abandoned lots, keep an eye on children as they go to school and tax their common resources to protect and preserve their communities. As

Rodwan told me recently, "I'm amazed at how much Detroiters get done at the grassroots."

In case you missed it, Sherwood Forest is the quiet cousin to more well-known neighborhoods that continue to bespeak of the city's past glory: Indian Village, Boston-Edison, Palmer Woods. Near Seven Mile and Livernois on the city's northwest side, the subdivision has about 400 homes – mostly Tudors – with a grandeur all its own.

Just months before the historic 1967 conflagration that was to change Detroit's destiny, The Detroit News ran a feature about Sherwood Forest. According to the News, the area was already transitioning from a community of old-line Jewish families to one of Catholics drawn by the University of Detroit-Gesu complex and black professionals who made up about 3 percent of the population.

By the time the Rodwans moved from Royal Oak to Sherwood Forest in 1970, white flight was in free fall.

"There were four or five 'for sale' signs on every block," Rodwan says. "But it never gave us pause. I've heard the refrain 'It's too dangerous in Detroit' for almost 50 years now. And even now when I hear it, I think: 'You don't know much about this place – and you don't want to know.'"

What the Rodwans found was a scenic, diverse neighborhood to raise their two children. To hear Gail's daughter Laura Rodwan tell it, Sherwood Forest was truly a place for Merry Men (and women and children).

"When I was a child, we made up games, put on plays and wrote our own stories and music," says Laura Rodwan, now a Detroit communications professional. "We rode bikes and played baseball and basketball in our small yards."

A vintage edition of the newsletter "The Tattler" reveals that the children were mounting a production about Helen Keller, celebrating the victory of their swim team and offering advice about stopping bicycle thefts. That sounds surprisingly normal for the late 1970s, when Detroit was reeling from the gas crisis, plummeting demand for American cars, rising crime and massive business divestment.

Through the decades, the community changed, but not its character. By the time the Hardins moved in the mid-1990s, it was a haven for black professionals.

"It was a plus to move into a black community with such history," says Carl Hardin, whose family came to Sherwood Forest from nearby Martin Park. "We liked that it was 80 percent black, but no one in the community felt uncomfortable."

While he traded up on the size of his house, Hardin never left behind the ethic for community involvement.

"We had a close block club in our neighborhood in Martin Park," says Hardin, who once served on the board of the Sherwood Forest Association. "So it didn't surprise me that you still had to be involved. That's what community is all about."

The association has had its work cut out. It helped defeat plans for an airport in the area and for a road that would have split the subdivision. It supported the reforestation of the area when Dutch elm disease claimed its majestic trees, fought for architecturally compatible streetlights, and

supported the preservation of the nearby retail while railing against the incompatible plans for a racetrack.

“It doesn’t matter if it’s a modest neighborhood where problems are larger than ours,” Gail Rodwan says, “you see how Detroiters come together and accomplish amazing things.”

Amazing things like preserving a neighborhood for 100 years. Today, Laura Rodwan is a Sherwood Forest homeowner on the same street where she grew up. She joins many Detroit families who are willing to roll up their sleeves, reach out to their neighbors, and build a community – home by home.

*The Story of Sherwood Forest: One Hundred Years a Detroit Neighborhood* is available from Wayne State University Press.