

Celebrating a Century

Sherwood Forest turns 100

By E. B. Allen

No welcome wagon awaited the family that moved onto Parkside in 1968. One of just three black-owned homes on the block, it became not only a place to eat and sleep, but a sanctuary for four small children's safety against harassment outside. Frequent vandalism made the message even more clear: Myla Perkins and her family were not wanted in the neighborhood.

That Perkins remained in Detroit's Sherwood Forest 40 more years was a twist to the story.

"The block was secure, the homes were large, and every family had three or four children," she recalls.

Sherwood Forest's shift from hostile territory into a community she fondly remembers is one aspect of what current and former residents celebrate in 2017. A neighborhood picnic, home tour, formal dinner, and commemorative



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- Gail Rodwan, author of *The Story of Sherwood Forest*

book have all been slated to observe the 100-year anniversary of the subdivision along Livernois Avenue between Seven and Eight Mile Roads.

"We thought our first centennial event was a great success," Sherwood Forest resident Gail Rodwan says of the July picnic, which drew about 275 guests.

"We invited both neighbors and anyone who has ever lived in Sherwood Forest to come."

A lawyer, Rodwan interviewed dozens of residents and poured through decades of news clippings, local announcements and Sherwood Forest Association (SFA) records to write *The Story of Sherwood Forest: One Hundred Years in a Neighborhood*, chronicling the community's physical and cultural evolution. Rodwan's husband J. Gordon Rodwan photographed many of the book's images. Proceeds from book sales will benefit the Association.

"We thought it would be nice to have something to preserve our history for the residents and the residents to come," says Gail Rodwan. "Even though I have lived here for 47 years, I learned some things about the neighborhood that I didn't know."

What became known as “the Grosse Pointe of North Woodward” was established as a tract of farmland by Abraham Hall and John Mullet in 1837. Eighty years later Sherwood Forest was born, following a Detroit Free Press advertisement that touted plots of land “hill- and dale-covered with a magnificent natural forest through which winding drives are laid out.” The first home in the neighborhood, which borrows its name from Robin Hood lore, was built in 1922.

The Story of Sherwood Forest engagingly describes the empowerment of residents, ranging from their successful opposition to a new airport’s construction near Eight Mile in the 1940s to their psychological recovery from Detroit’s 1967 civil uprising and their survival of the past decade’s housing crisis.

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A recent crowning achievement was the “Lighting the Way” campaign in 2014. It challenged neighbors to raise \$65,000 for streetlight fixtures that reflected Sherwood Forest’s historic style and architecture in a matter of weeks. In an agreement between Sherwood Forest Association and the city, residents generated \$80,000 by organizing a youth fun day and making donations.

Residents since 1977, Shirley and James Jackson have supported “Lighting the Way” and other efforts.

“I think about all the problems for people who were caught up in foreclosure,” says Shirley Jackson, who chairs the SFA’s communications committee and publishes its newsletter. “We had a lot of homes in our neighborhood that were a part of that, and we still kept our neighborhood managed and looking well-populated. It was very hard to know when homes were vacant, because neighbors and the Association maintained them.”

Safety, including the neighborhood’s voluntary designation as a Special Assessment District, which assesses homeowners for private security patrols, is a key attribute, James Jackson says.

“The community has always been a place where you see people walking,” he says. “You see people walking their dogs up and down the street, you see people riding their bikes. You see a very active, safe community.”

Once predominantly Jewish, Sherwood Forest’s homeowners have included Detroit Tigers legend Willie Horton, singer Gladys Knight and actor Robert Wagner, who starred in the ‘80s TV show *Hart to Hart* and later appeared in the *Austin Powers* film series and had a recurring role in *NCIS*. A former Harlem Globetrotter, Charlie Primas and his wife Lois Primas, past SFA president, still reside there.

While the income brackets of the neighborhood’s many judges, doctors and prominent educators have contributed to its centennial status, a Livemore business owner says loyalty is a common trait.

“One of the best things is that they are very conscientious consumers,” says Ronda Morrison, whose dad Theodore opened House of Morrison Professional Shoe Repair in 1968. “They like patronizing a business in the community where they live.”

Former residents, like Perkins, who sold her son the Parkside house he grew up in, share memories of Sherwood Forest. Shirley Jackson says she’ll stay another 40 years, if she has her way.

“It’s not perfect,” she says, “but it’s by far the best neighborhood I’ve ever lived in.”

For more information about Sherwood Forest centennial celebration events visit www.sherwoodforestdetroit.org.

Photo: Paul Engstrom



Sherwood Forest resident Martin S. Baum (right) welcomes former neighbors to a garden reception before a neighborhood picnic to celebrate the subdivision's 100th anniversary.

Photo courtesy Laura Rodwan



Neighbors gather at the entrance to Sherwood Forest's centennial picnic, which drew several-hundred current and former residents to the west side Detroit neighborhood for food, friendship and fun.

Photo: Paul Engstrom



Elena Farmer, Cleo Maxie and retired Judge Walter Shapero enjoy reminiscing about life in Sherwood Forest during one the neighborhood's centennial festivities.