

## **Stolen History**

by  
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For as long as people can recall, many of the residents from the Robertsdale neighborhood have considered themselves part of the Whiting community. To compound this issue is the confusion regarding the 46394 zip code. Although Robertsdale citizens share a zip code with their Whiting counterparts, they technically live in Hammond. Because Robertsdale is closer to the Whiting post office than the Hammond post office, officials have chosen to assign these homes with the Whiting zip code. However, there was a time when all of Robertsdale was once considered part of Whiting, Indiana.

Before the arrival of the Standard Oil Company, Whiting's population was too small to justify its incorporation as a town. The settlers, who were mainly immigrants from Germany, were law-abiding citizens. The county sheriff was located thirty miles away in Crown Point, and he had little need to visit the territory. However, once Standard Oil started its construction project, the need for local government became apparent. It was now too hard for the sheriff to keep law and order in Whiting from his distant office.

The first attempt to incorporate Whiting as a town came in the spring of 1892. An informal public meeting was held at Soltwedel's Hall. At this time, a committee was formed of individuals in favor of incorporation. Also, a map was drafted showing boundary lines of the proposed town. The territory proposed consisted of the Indiana Harbor Ship Canal westward to the Indiana-Illinois state line and lying north of Berry Lake, Lake George and Wolf Lake. This boundary provided Whiting with several miles of Lake Michigan frontal property.

Plans for a second meeting, two weeks later, were also made. When the organization reconvened for the second meeting, a complete turnaround was made on the issue of incorporation.

Now, it seemed that no one wanted Whiting to become a town, even the people in favor at the first meeting changed their minds. In addition, at the second meeting there were huge protests by individuals who were adamantly against incorporation.

Seeing such a complete reversal of sentiment, plans for incorporation were scraped. The Standard Oil Company, as well as other property owners, were powerful enough to block the incorporation attempt. Likewise, the fear of an increase in taxes dissuaded many individuals who were originally in favor of the idea.

During the summer of 1893, a violent episode made Whiting citizens once again rethink the idea of incorporation. In the evening of July 17, 1893, a group of strangers, with murder on their minds, came to William Timm's Hunter's Resort in Robertsdale. The resort was located between the Pennsylvania Company and the Lake Shore and Michigan Southern Railway tracks. Swartz retells the event in his essay "Some Early Days of Whiting."

"A murderous assault was made upon Timm and when the fight was over, two of the attacking forces lay dead and another was so seriously injured that he died a few weeks afterward; while Timm and George Dorsch, who had come to his assistance, lay seriously injured." The other strangers in the party escaped and were never caught.

In addition, there were no municipal police officers on hand to pursue the assailants. Likewise, there was no one to arrest the injured criminal that was left behind. Without the proper facilities for a jail, the captured criminal was secured to a tree with a chain. It was not until the following day that the county sheriff arrived in Whiting to handle the situation.

Since Whiting refused to incorporate, the frightened citizens of Robertsdale turned to the city of Hammond for assistance. Prominent members of Robertsdale presented a petition to Mayor Thomas Hammond requesting the annexation of the Robertsdale territory to the city of Hammond.

The Hammond city administration was eager for frontage land on Lake Michigan. They wanted to assure an adequate water supply in order to further expand the city's industrial base.

Mayor Hammond accepted the petition and began to annex all of the territory lying between Atchison Avenue and the Indiana-Illinois state line. Whiting was now surrounded by Hammond and East Chicago, land locked on both sides. The opportunity for future expansion was lost forever.

There was some question whether or not the city of Hammond had the right to annex property that was so far from its borders. The Robertsdale area was five miles from the city proper. Hammond was the first city in the State of Indiana to attempt such a feat, thereby setting a precedent. In addition, Hammond built their water works on the banks of Lake Michigan in Robertsdale. The city of Hammond also constructed a large water line from the lake to the city of Hammond, essentially crossing through Robertsdale. Hammond used this logic as justification for the annexation.

Mayor Hammond was never in favor of the annexing of Robertsdale, but bowed to the favor of his constituency. This was not the case for the city of Hammond's next administration. In 1893, Mayor Patrick Reilly replaced Thomas Hammond, becoming the third mayor of the city of Hammond. Mayor Reilly found that the burden of taxes in the city was too great, and that this burden was growing yearly. He concluded that the only way to ease the strain on the city's purse strings was to annex the rest of Whiting.

In 1894, the Hammond City Council voted to annex all of Whiting except for the refinery and the oil company's cottages. In view of the oil company's opposition to incorporation, the city of Hammond figured that Standard Oil would not object to the annexation. After Hammond acquired Whiting, they planned to go after the refinery, which was highly taxed. As soon as the Hammond city council passed the ordinance, they put Hammond police officers throughout the

Whiting area. This abrupt lack of respect for the Whiting citizens created a lot of bitter and angry residents, Standard Oil being one of them.

The Standard Oil Company, Jacob Forsythe, and the citizens of Whiting joined together in a long and bitter fight with the City of Hammond. This new band of brothers formed a legal partnership which was funded primarily by the Standard Oil Company. The oil company felt that they would receive more favorable financial treatment in the hands of Whiting instead of Hammond.

In June of 1894, while the battle with Hammond was being fought in the courts, Whiting submitted a petition to the Lake County Commissioners which they approved. The petition asked that Whiting's citizens be given the right to vote on the issue of incorporation. The territory in question included the part of Whiting annexed by the Hammond City Council.

The election was held on June 18, 1895. Standard Oil officials strongly urged their employees to vote for incorporation. Swartz recalls that the city buzzed with excitement that day. "The Election Day was fair and warm, and great crowds thronged the polls all day watching the stream of voters coming in, many of them expressing their enthusiasm for the project." The vote was 685 to 2 in favor of the incorporation of an independent Whiting. A week later, Hammond withdrew their police from Whiting's streets.

Although Whiting eventually incorporated, their lack of foresight forever deprived the city of a great opportunity to become one of the Calumet Region's largest cities. In addition, this lack of vision robbed Whiting of miles of lakefront property, which would have been ideal for future industrial development. The annexation of Robertsdale forever stole a part of Whiting's future history. To find out more about Whiting's history stop by the Local History Room.