

Lilydale Explorer by Lois Owen, Resident of Lilydale

A Brief History of Lilydale and a Salute to It's Survival All These Years!

In the face of urbanization and floods, both of which could easily have engulfed Lilydale, how did this tiny town survive? After researching this question at both the Dakota Co. Historical Museum and the Minnesota History Museum Library, I have come to the conclusion that the answer lies in its peculiar mix of citizens over the years, who have shown an amazing combination of Darwinian traits that have led them to adapt to change and survive. Lilydale has certainly done this as you will see when you read the brief history below!

Here are some major events in Lilydale's history:

1855 --The first property transaction was filed in the Dakota County Recorder's Office. The name of Alexander Ramsey, who I'm sure you know was a former Minnesota Governor, is included among those speculating on land in this area where Sioux Indians had lived, fished and hunted for centuries.

1859 -- The Wabasha Bridge (then called the Dakota) is built and is the first bridge to cross the Mississippi from St. Paul to Dakota County.

1866 -- The railroad was built through Mendota, causing steady growth through the Minnesota River Valley and St. Paul and, ironically, eliminating Mendota's role as a regional trade center. This was because now the railroad surpassed the river for transportation needs.

1874 -- Old West St. Paul was transferred to Ramsey County's jurisdiction.

1886 -- Lilly Dale Addition -- (its spelling changed often over the years.) Four couples, including Clifford and Mary Clarkson, who named "Lilydale" because of the many lilies growing in nearby Pickerel Lake, moved into the first permanent white settlement. The signed certificate states that their holdings had been surveyed and platted, "and hereafter known as Lilly Dale Addition".

1901 -- Village of Lilly Dale -- Before 1901 Lilydale belonged to Mendota Township. However, some of the far-seeing residents were aware of the advantages of incorporating their village, and after a community vote in the schoolhouse, built in 1893, the area officially became incorporated and so separated from Mendota Township, even though some property owners demanded a return to Mendota connections. After all, they asked, how would they get help with improving the road and other needed services?

1905 -- The census shows a Lilydale population of 173, made up of English, Danes, Swedes, Germans and Canadians. The local newspaper declares, "We have a fine looking schoolhouse here and a church (St. Barnabus) will be built this summer. Since its incorporation the village has made great gains in all directions and if the present activity amongst the people here is any sign towards success, there is no doubt that this village will become one of the foremost in the county."

1906 -- A scandal was reported in the West St. Paul Times with indictments handed down against Lilydale officials for the misappropriation of \$500 in state funds borrowed for the purpose of fixing up local roads and bridges. There were also indictments filed for election fraud. The Village was soon dissolved and returned to Mendota where it remained for nearly 50 years.

1907 -- The development of inland navigation on the River begins with dredging and construction of wing dams and levees to deepen the channel to 4 feet for passing steamboats and lumber rafts being floated downstream to St. Paul and beyond. Railroad rates were becoming too steep and farmers and businesses were pressuring the federal government to do something about it. Pressure was on to make the river more navigable.

1926 -- The original Robert Street Bridge was replaced by the now historic, arched bridge; this was the same year another concrete arch bridge, the Mendota Bridge, was built. It was, at 4,119 feet, the longest concrete arch bridge in the world.

1930 -- The 4 foot channel in the River was not sufficient so Congress authorized the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to construct a 9-foot deep channel between Minneapolis and St. Louis providing for 36 locks and 29 dams so that navigation could be vastly improved and shipping on the Mississippi could finally compete with the railroads. These were completed during the Great Depression creating jobs for thousands of unemployed workers. Meeker Island was the site of the first lock and dam.

1950 --The last students attend Lilydale School, subsequent to a merger plan that takes them to Humboldt, Sibley Jr. High, and Emerson Schools; the old schoolhouse remains a community center.

1951 -- Lilydale had remained quiet in civic affairs until 1951 when, following a spring flood, the J.L. Shiely Company of St. Paul approached Mendota Township requesting that 11 acres of land in the former Lilydale be re-zoned from agricultural to industrial use. At this time Lilydale was mainly farmland except for the sand and gravel operation. This was land that Shiely wanted so he could extend his quarry 1500 feet along the highway. The Mendota Township Planning Board met and heated arguments followed with many saying it would degrade the real estate values, destroy the beauty of the area and so on. So Shiely Co. withdrew their petition, but later that same year Shiely Co. offered the 50 families of Lilydale \$5,000 for the road improvements if they would incorporate into a village again. And so on September 10, 1951, after considerable discussion of the proposition, voting took place. The vote was 47 to 45 to break away from Mendota Township. Mendota tried to reclaim Lilydale by saying the area was not capable of being a village or adapting to village government. Furthermore, they argued that the Lilydale separation and Shiely agreement were a violation of the Corrupt Practice Act. However, the Minnesota State Attorney General rejected this claim, saying that the money offer was made openly and not concealed. Life in Lilydale resumed. Shiely paid for an attorney for one year to get the town started, filled in the river bank where the river had washed out the road, delivered 1000 cubic yards of dirt to fill in a low spot in the road, paid the cost of all fire calls for 3 years, and contributed \$5,000 to the village treasury. There was also a natural gas line running through the village. The village had every advantage...except that Old Man River.

An April flood in 1952 ravaged the river valley. Mobile homes, which could be towed away in the event of flood, became popular in Lilydale. In 1955 John Thompson (a true "mover and shaker" of Lilydale and on the City Council from 1951-1980 as mayor, trustee, councilman and city clerk who had opposed the above offer by Shiely Co. because he thought it was a bribe by Shiely to continue his quarry operation) built the Pool and Yacht Club in lower Lilydale even though his home had been flooded twice. Thompson then made his home in the upper part of the Yacht Club. It was at this time, when lower Lilydale was in decline, that the new Lilydale was starting, and Thompson was very much a part of that. In fact, he once owned much of the upper part of the town. In 1962 he built Diamond Jim's which really put Lilydale on the map. It followed a Diamond Jim Brady gay nineties theme featuring such capers as having a beautiful girl dart up a spiral staircase to a balcony, slip into a velvet swing, sweep through the air and slide down a brass pole. The Mills Brothers, the Ink Spots and Dick Van Dyke were among some of the performers. It made Lilydale famous. The same year he also moved his father's lightning protection firm to the town and the next year he shooed the cows off the bluff and built the Colony Club apartments. A decade later, his Colony Townhomes went up. The River Pointe Condominiums were built in 1963.

1962 -- Crosby Park was built along the bluff that rises from the flood plain from land donated by English immigrant farmer Thomas Crosby who worked the land more than 150 years ago.

1965 --This was the year of the worst recorded flood in Upper Mississippi River history. Almost every home was wiped out. Lower Lilydale virtually ceased to exist. In 1972 St. Paul officials started talking to the town's citizens about acquiring the village as a park site. Lilydale was now a community of 664 people, but the plans were to acquire lower Lilydale and create a park link between land owned by Ramsey County near the downtown area and near Ft. Snelling. Planners called it ideal open space. The Twin Cities Brick Yards, also located in lower Lilydale, closed down completely after years of decline. All that was left in lower Lilydale were Wayne Brown's Marina (also called Brown's Riverside Inn with its tavern and store, the social center of lower Lilydale), the Pool and Yacht Club, Bernie's Body Shop, and one elderly homeowner. The County offered Brown's Marina \$9,000 but Brown said that was far below the value of the operation and they haggled for years before the matter went into condemnation producing an award of \$223,000 with a final settlement of \$230,000. It was a sad day for many to see the city lose one of its Ma and Pa operations to the government.

1973 -- Clayton Rein, a local real estate developer started construction on the Lilydale Tennis Club. The Club would soon have over 3,000 members. In this same year construction was started on the Lexington-Riverside Condominiums. In 1974 the Overlook Condominiums were completed.

1977 -- Lilydale, as part of the Twin Cities Metropolitan Area, was required by the Metropolitan Land Planning Act to complete a Comprehensive Plan by 1980. This Plan (the first of its kind for Lilydale, with later years producing two more Comprehensive Plans) was prepared with aid from the Local Assistance Program of the Dakota County Planning Department. It was prepared to meet requirements of the Mandatory Land Planning Act and critical area designation. At this time there were 206 households: 20 apartments, 170 condominium units, 9 townhouses, and seven single-family dwellings. The Metropolitan Council estimated the population at 310 with the majority of citizens residing in condominiums, town houses and apartments. In 1969 Lilydale became a city including 330 acres of floodplain and Pickerel Lake. One major accomplishment of the city was the designing of and installment of a sewer system. By this time Lilydalers intended to remain an entity. They liked the tax situation and the property base was good. The Plan said that some buildings, though, were constructed too close to the bluffline. The Mayor at this time was Robert Beaird; Harold Rehfeld was the Planning Commissioner, and Clyde Nelson the Police Chief. The city contracted with Mendota Heights for both police and fire

protection. At this time the citizens enjoyed a unique mixture of urban and natural environment, from developed land to the near-wild state of the marshlands and Pickerel Lake. It was in this year, too, that 3,000 elm trees were removed from the slope areas of Lilydale Park.

1979 -- A Resolution was written and signed by Robert Beaird, Mayor, to endorse and approve the concept of the federal "Great River Road" for Highway 13 through Lilydale which made the road eligible for improvement with Federal and State funds. Robert Beaird was Mayor for 3 terms and in his term in office there was little to spend the city's money on except for the police and fire protection from Mendota Heights. It's only street, Hwy. 13, was now maintained by the State. There were no city recreational facilities, for which there was no need because there were no children, and the city's apartment and condominium buildings supplied the pools, saunas, tennis courts and party rooms. It had a tidy commercial and industrial tax base in the yacht club, tennis club, sand and gravel barge terminal and in the Lilydale Mall.

1980 -- The Lexington Court Condominiums are built. Harvey Bream was the developer and also a resident. He was on the Council and was mayor for 15 years, retiring in 1995. Riverain Condominiums were built in the mid-80's.

1983 -- Jurisdiction over Lilydale Park is officially given to the City of St. Paul in a land swap which gave Ramsey County control of Battle Creek and Pigs Eye Lake park areas. Lower Lilydale was now being converted to a regional park as part of the Ramsey County Open Space System. The Old Lilydale City Hall and former school building, built in 1893, was part of the acquisition, due to tax forfeiture. A letter was sent from the St. Paul Park's Department to the Dakota County Historical Society asking if there was interest in preserving the old building. Unfortunately, though, this landmark in Lilydale for 89 years was destroyed by arson and so with the destruction of the school, the last remaining building on the Lilydale river bank was now gone.

1988 -- Congress established the 72-mile long Mississippi National River and Recreation Area (MNRRA), of which Lilydale is a part, as a unit of the National Park System. The Corridor's economic development started with flour and timber milling and gradually changed to brick making and beer brewing and one could now add tourism, recreation, and conservation. In 1995 the DNR took over management of the critical corridor area.

1991 -- The Lilydale/Harriet Island Regional Park Master Plan was officially adopted.

1992 -- Dakota County learned that a segment of the Soo Line Railroad Corridor would soon become available for use as a potential Regional Trail corridor. MNDOT started working with the County and the Metropolitan Council to preserve this segment as a regional trail. This was to become the Big River Regional Trail.

1993 -- Holiday Store and Gas Station have opened. There are two new Townhome developments: Lilyhill on Victoria Road and Lilywood on Hwy 13; the Pool and Yacht Club has been remodeled. There is a new Lilydale Garden Center. The AMOCO Station is about to be built and Harvey Bream is the Mayor; Bernard Weitzman, the Clerk/Treasurer; Donald Peterson, the Building Inspector. Ed Mullarky was on the City Council and will become the next Mayor in 1996 and will be returned to office 4 times.

2000 -- Developer, Gene Rancone, has decided to turn the former 26-acre Sheily site, which is now being used by Cemstone Products for storing aggregate needed for construction work at Mnpls-St. Paul Airport, into a lucrative condominium development of grand-scale townhomes, called Stonebridge. Mayor Mullarky was happy to see the development come into Lilydale but some residents are worrying

about drainage of storm water which has flooded their underground garages. The town is also trying to get bus service, but doesn't really expect it since almost every family has at least 2 cars.

In this same year, the Mullarky Pedestrian Trail was approved and built alongside Highway 13. The St. Paul Parks Dept. also agreed to allow construction of Vento's View at a viewpoint westward where both Minneapolis and St. Paul city skylines can be seen. This viewpoint is named after the late congressman, Bruce Vento, and is located on Cherokee Heights Blvd. in Lilydale. The new Lilydale City Hall was built in 2003.

2006 -- Tom Swain, a retired insurance executive for St. Paul Companies (now Travelers), and who also served as Governor Elmer Andersen's chief of staff in the 1960's, and remains connected to the University of Minnesota in one capacity or another to this day, becomes Mayor. Even though he was 85 he said, "I figured that I'm still reasonably vibrant so why not? My motto has been that it's better to wear out than to rust out." Swain who grew up during the Depression in South Minneapolis and knew the meaning of money and the importance of frugality, worked in his retirement to erase the city's \$250,000 debt.

Also in 2006, John Mathern of Mendota Homes, purchased the Tennis and Health Club for \$6 million and 4 months later the city approved plans for his \$40 million development project. However, in 2008 the economy went into recession and the whole project was put on hold. But as John Mathern said, "It's a very good piece of property in a good location...and good locations always weather well." (St. Paul Pioneer Press, 8/27/08)

Conclusion -- In understanding how Lilydale became what it is today, which is a vibrant community that is still growing, there were many factors. From 1850 to 1950 Lilydale was predominantly rural and had agriculture as its economic base. Geographically, it was located in between Minneapolis' urban development and on the upstream edge of St. Paul's urban growth. In the early years, Lilydale had the Mississippi River for steamboat transportation and then, in 1866, the railroad came to Mendota. New transportation systems were creating "winners" and "losers" among the region's communities. Then, in the Thirties, came the dams and the digging of a 9 foot channel in the River so that with the completion of the Locks and Dams, the river again became a dominant form of transportation with barges carrying all manner of goods. Our little town also had other types of commerce in addition to agriculture, the river, and the railroad. Lilydale was close to lumber mills in St. Paul, but the building materials we really had were quarries, bricks and lime kilns. Roads were also being built along the old military routes .

Lilydale had all of these resources at hand; its citizens, through ingenuity, vision, hard work, and community pride, have enabled our town to survive and made it what it is today. By taking advantage of everything they had and adapting to change so effectively, the town has evolved and survived in a most triumphant way.