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Portage Prospers

After the Civil War was over, several changes occurred in Portage. Some of the pioneer farmers began acquiring more land near their old farms; others sold their farms and bought farms in other locations. A few moved to other townships and others went farther west. Citizens in Kalamazoo were still holding land for speculation but were gradually selling to newcomers. As a rule the new farmers moving in bought farms of from forty to fifty acres. In some instances the old settlers purchased more land belonging to the government. The Van Hoesens, Bonfoeys and Mattesons all seemed to farm land in more than one section and the Cooleys farmed several pieces of land. They no longer ran the gristmill which had been purchased by John Kilgore's son, Hiram.

Isaac Brooks owned about 400 acres in the northwest area and Ebenezer Durkee owned over 350 acres in the center of Portage, although part of his land was not farmed. Some of Durkee's property was sold for a hotel built in 1850 by Daniel Lathrop and other pieces were sold for the railroad and railroad station and for a grain elevator.

Two large farms happened to be owned and run by sons of 1831 pioneers. In 1850, Moses Woodard's son, John, had travelled to California and after returning from a successful gold mining adventure he was able to buy 207 acres in the northeast portion of the township, including the land first purchased by his father. Moses and the rest of the family had moved to Brady Township. During the same year in which John Woodard left for California, John Gibbs, another 1831 pioneer who had entered land in southwestern Kalamazoo Township adjoining Section 6 in Portage, took his son, William, to California by ox team. They were so successful with their gold mining that they

came back with several nuggets and sacks of gold dust. John soon returned to California with another son, but William purchased 4000 acres of government land in Kansas on speculation and a large farm next to George Howard's farm in Portage Township. He then married one of the Prouty sisters from Allegan and built a substantial farmhouse on what is now Angling Road. He called his farm "Oak Grove."

Most of the families living in the northwest part of Portage were related in one way or another. For example, the Prouty sisters connected three of these families through marriage. By marrying Jennetta Prouty, Gibbs more or less joined the Howard clan which at that time occupied a good portion of the northwest area of Portage Township. Pioneer John E. Howard had brought his seven children with him when he moved to Portage. Of these children Stephen, Rossiter and Prudence seem to have been the most prominent in Portage history. Stephen and his neighbor, Allison Kinne, were related by their marriage to sisters. Stephen's daughter, Harriet, married Isaac Brooks' son, Albert; Stephen's son, George, married Pearlie Prouty; and Isaac Brooks' other son, Henry, married Galeta Prouty. Rossiter Howard lived on the farm in Section 5 also occupied by his father, John; and Prudence Howard Wattles and her sons lived on sizeable farms in Section 7. When Stephen Howard passed away, his daughter, Amanda, continued to occupy the brick home he had built in 1859. Allison Kinne's son, Henry, continued to live on the Kinne farm. Some of the homes built by these early settlers remain today on land which the early agricultural reports indicate was once very productive farm land.

Rossiter Howard was the first of the descend-



John and Jennetta Prouty Gibbs

ants of early pioneers to leave the northwest area of Portage when in 1862 he sold his farm to William Boylan, son of a pioneer from nearby Texas Township. Rossiter and his family moved farther west to Walla Walla, Washington. Most of the other descendants remained, some of them well into the twentieth century.

Alice Howard, the oldest living granddaughter of Stephen Howard is living in Kalamazoo. At ninety-five she has many amusing incidents to tell about her early years on the farm. Apparently her great aunt, Belva Howard, lived with her Aunt Amanda. Great Aunt Prudy lived a short distance away and some of their time was spent visiting on the front porch of Grandpa Stephen's house. They all smoked pipes and one Fourth of July Aunt Belva was induced to ride in an ox cart in the parade dressed in pioneer costume and smoking her pipe. Another fond memory is of walking over the hill to her great aunt Lydia Kinne's farm and going wading with her cousins in their creek. She and Burson Gibbs, grandson of William Gibbs, both recall going to pick the huge blackberries that grew in Mandy's Woods. For years her Aunt Amanda owned a twenty acre woodlot and allowed all the children to pick blackberries when they were ripe. Many of the trees are still standing on the property now owned by the Frizzell family on Vincent Drive and Angling Road. Mrs. Vincent, who owned the property until a few years ago, followed Amanda's example

and for many years generously shared her woods and fields with the children at nearby Angling Road School for their nature studies. The Frizzells are maintaining that tradition.

A few large barns may still be seen in the area once occupied by the Howard clan and one of the few root cellars remaining in Portage is found on the former George Howard farm in Section 6. All of the farms mentioned above along with several others including those owned by the Kilgores, Milhams, Crooks, Bacons, Beckleys, Cutlers, and Hawkins produced grain but many of their fields were also dotted with sheep. According to reports, every farmer kept a few pigs, one to six cows, some chickens and from two to four horses. Some farmers grew large amounts of corn and wheat and a few planted several acres in potatoes. Oats were popular with about a dozen farmers but only a few grew barley.

In 1880 on his 207 acre farm John Woodard raised 880 bushels of wheat, 525 bushels of corn and 110 bushels of oats besides keeping several sheep. In that same year Martin Bacon surpassed all other farmers in Portage by growing 1500 bushels of wheat, 350 bushels of corn, 300 bushels of oats and 395 bushels of barley. His farm was located on what is now Upjohn Company property.

The increase in grain production by farmers was due to the larger number of acres of cleared land and the increasing availability of farm machinery. Cyrus McCormick had moved his reaper factory to Chicago shortly before 1860, but because of a shortage of materials during the Civil War he did not begin large scale production until about 1870. Threshing machines had been invented by the 1880's and some of the farmers made a business of threshing grain. Frank Bacon, a cousin of top grain producer Martin, not only did threshing but in the spring did a considerable amount of sheep shearing. Some of the farmers did their own shearing if they had enough farm help.

William Cobb, who for several years lived on his Portage Road farm in a house which is now the Beacon Club, went into the wool business in Kalamazoo. He bought large quantities of wool from area sheep farmers and shipped it by railroad to eastern carding and weaving mills. He maintained his farm in Portage by hiring a farm manager. Some of the wool from Portage sheep was sent directly to the carding mills in Kalamazoo. Many farmers' wives continued to spin their own yarn which they dyed and knitted into stockings, socks, vests, sweaters, and caps for the entire family. Before Mr. Cobb, two other Portage farmers had gone into business in Kalamazoo. One of these was Benjamin Austin, whose Kalamazoo business ventures were described in a previous chapter. In 1846, Caleb Sweetland sold

his land to Stephen Howard and moved to Kalamazoo where he ran an implement business until he was eighty years old.

Plowing the fields had become an easier task for the Portage farmer. After coming home from the Civil War, Leroy Cahill went into the grocery business in Kalamazoo. He then opened an implement business and soon invented a plow that proved very helpful to the farmer. Called the *sulky plow*, it was pulled by a horse driven by the farmer who was seated directly behind the plow. By 1890 over 75,000 sulky plows had been sold in ten eastern and midwestern states. Soon Cahill had quite an imposing factory in Kalamazoo, but he never sold his Portage farm. It was the old farm his grandfather had bought from Arad Cooley in the 1830's. Now it is the site of Southland Mall and adjacent apartments and homes.

Daniel Cahill, Leroy's father, had grazed sheep and raised corn and wheat on the farm, but Leroy, as an absentee landlord, operated a model pig farm that was unique in Portage, which was a community of sheep farmers. Carl Snow and Herschel Kilgore remember vividly stopping often while on their way to Carpenter's Corners School to watch the pigs. Mr. Snow relates that the farm

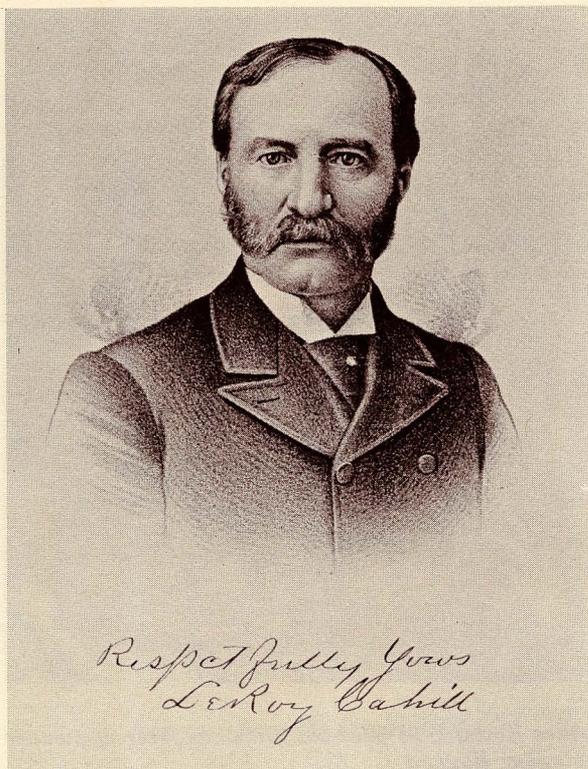


Alice Howard, 95 year old granddaughter of pioneer Stephen Howard

From an 1861 Kalamazoo County wall map



Res. of Stephen Howard. Portage (Sec. 7.)



was surrounded by a high chain fence, and outside the fence red raspberry bushes had been planted. The ground inside was covered with concrete and the pig houses were built of concrete and cement blocks. The pigs had their own private bathing pool and any visitors coming inside the gate were required to wipe their feet on a mat. Mr. Cahill must have been a most successful business man for in addition to his manufacturing and farming activities he was a director of the Cone Coupler Carriage Company, the Chicago, Kalamazoo and Saginaw Railway Company and the First National Bank and was president of the Electric Light Company. Not only did he retain ownership of the farm in Portage, but he also owned a 1600 acre ranch in Kansas.

Besides remembering the pig farm, Mr. Snow recalls that during the dry season farmers would run their wagons into the creek in order to expand the spokes of the wheels. Oakland Drive, then known as Asylum Avenue, was a narrow dusty road on a level with the creek. It was no problem to drive off the road and allow the wagon to remain in the creek for a time.

Farmers going to the village of Kalamazoo usually went by way of Carpenter's Corners, which became a center for business in the last half of the nineteenth century. In addition to the

Leroy Cahill's sulky plow factory in Kalamazoo.



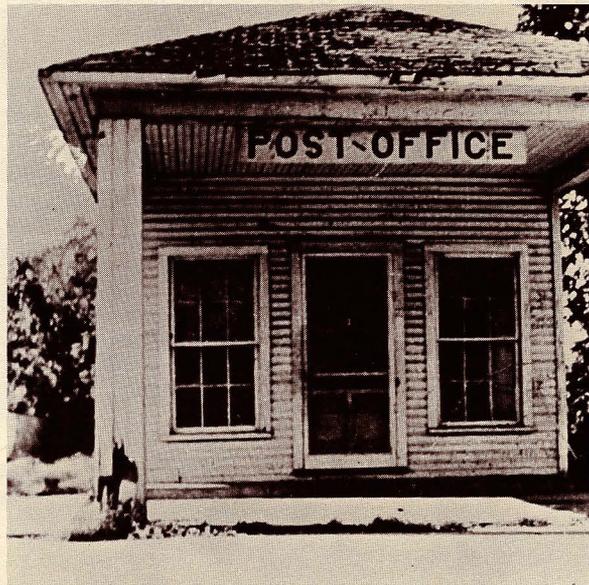
school, there was a general store, a blacksmith shop and a small tavern. The first post office for Portage Township had been established there as early as 1840. John Howard was the first postmaster in 1836 and was succeeded by Henry Tuttle after Portage became a township. Perhaps the post office was then located in the Tuttle tavern near Portage Center. Lettie Matteson served the longest term in the post office as postmistress in the 1920's and again in the 1940's. She and her Portage born husband, Porter, raised a family of ten in Portage, where Lettie was also a teacher and Porter one of the original school bus drivers as well as a carpenter by trade. The post office was housed in several different buildings through the years and is now located in Portage Plaza.

Portage farmers seem to have been inclined toward business ventures. In 1863 the Kalamazoo County Farmers Mutual Insurance Company was organized with five Portage farmers among the eight incorporators including John Milham, Samuel Crooks, William Trumbull, Isaac Cox, and Joseph Beckley. Originally the membership numbered 132 county residents including thirty Portage farmers. After the Civil War the company began to grow. By 1890 the membership had increased to over 8,850 and the value of the policies well exceeded \$4,514,350. At this time Richard Sykes, early Portage settler, was secretary and treasurer, and because of the pressure of business he sold his farm to devote full time to the company.

Throughout the last three decades of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, a small number of farmers remained in the old homesteads, improved their land, added to their stock, modernized their homes to some extent and were active in the political and social circles of the community. During the first two or three decades of the twentieth century, some of the larger farms, particularly those along the northern portion of Westnedge Avenue, were divided into very small tracts. Most of these small farms were occupied by families with business and professional connections in Kalamazoo. In going over old records and contacting descendants of early Portage residents, it is surprising to learn how many went into the teaching profession. Some followed other professions and several chose careers in banking or real estate. Two papermills were established by Portage men, both direct descendants of pioneer Joseph Beckley. Irving Milham founded the Bryant mill and Louis Sutherland established the mill now owned by the Brown Company. The Boylan family, prominent in the automobile business in Kalamazoo for many years, still owns considerable acreage in Portage. For years it was farmed by the William Bishops, but much of it was sold to the Episcopal

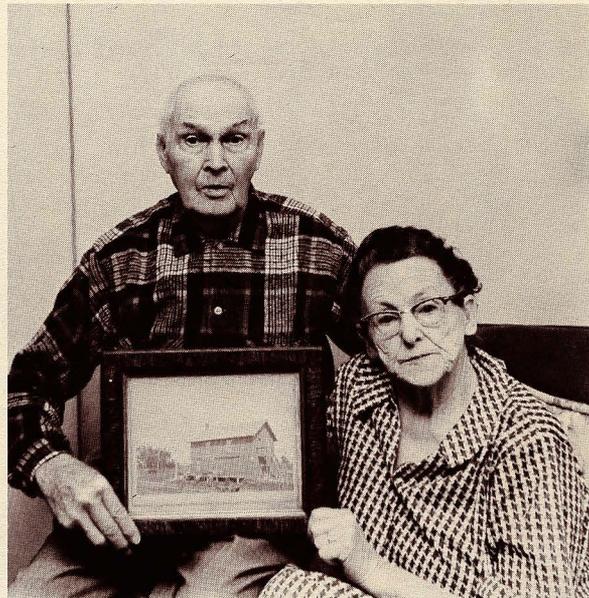
cathedral and to the state for the construction of I-94 highway. The home, still standing on the Angling Road property, was built by the Howard family, one of the earliest pioneer families, before it was purchased by the Boylans. The Greek Revival structure is certainly one of Portage's oldest and most historic homes.

The farmers who remained in Portage availed themselves of modern machinery and equipment



An old Portage post office which was on Shaver Road at Westnedge.

Porter and Lettie Matteson in later years.



as they were developed. Tractors pulled the heavy farm machinery; cars and trucks began to take the place of buggies and wagons; tall silos appeared next to barns; and riding instead of work horses were sometimes seen in the pastures. The wives of the farmers also benefited from modern inventions. Although there was still a great deal of work to do, the coming of the windmill eased the job of obtaining water for many farm duties. In photographs of the farm homes of this era, there is always a windmill pictured, usually next to the spring house. First made on a wooden frame and later constructed of steel, they shouldered an important share of the workload of both the farmer and his wife. Many windmills were made in Kalamazoo, where in 1884 there were fourteen windmill factories selling their products in Michigan and other states. John

Woodard was part owner of one factory.

Cook stoves became available and new cooking equipment took the place of the heavy iron kettles. The first stoves were built close to the floor so that much stooping was still required. The oven was located on one side and food was often burned from an overheated oven. With improvements in design, it was soon possible to buy a stove with the oven beneath the cooking surface which raised that surface to a more comfortable height. Next came the addition of a reservoir on the side to provide a source of ready hot water. Small heating stoves appeared shortly before cook stoves and these, too, were improved constantly until the tall coal stoves with isinglass windows were developed.

The existence of flour mills in the area made it possible for wives to improve their baking skills. No longer were they dependent on cornmeal alone, but they could have their own wheat milled into white flour or buy it by the barrel from the mill. Every week large loaves of bread appeared from the ovens and cakes, pies and cookies were baked by the housewife. At church suppers, picnics and family gatherings, baking skills seemed to have been prized accomplishments. When county fairs began, it was usually the farmers' wives who walked off with the coveted prizes.

Making butter was another accomplishment of the housewife. Although most Portage farmers



The Herbert Boylan family on the side porch of the Boylan home on Angling Road — ca. 1897.

Barn and outbuildings on the Boylan farm.



kept an average of three or four cows, a few had as many as seven or eight. The agricultural reports of 1880 to 1900 indicate that most wives churned an average of 200 to 300 pounds of butter a year. A few exceeded this. In 1880 Mrs. John Hawkins made 400 pounds and Mrs. William Milham made 500 pounds. Any butter and eggs not used in the household were sold to families in Kalamazoo or traded at the general store, and the proceeds were usually allotted to the women of the family.

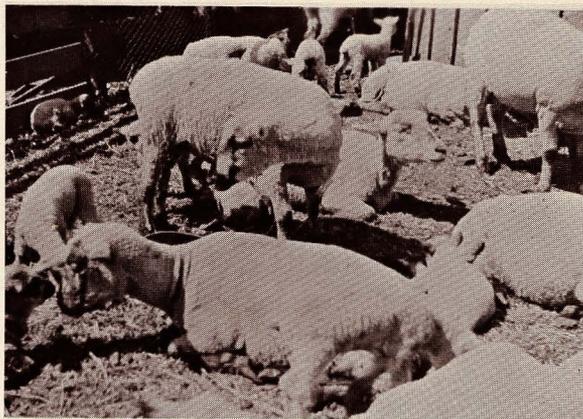
During this period many farmers enlarged their homes or built new ones. No doubt much of the butter and egg money was spent on home furnishings and equipment. Heavy mahogany and cherry furniture was fashionable and the carved horsehair sofa and chairs were prized possessions. Large flowered Axminster rugs and elaborate lace curtains made a background for the furniture. Hand crocheted or knitted antimacassars graced the backs of chairs and heavily framed pictures adorned the walls. Dishes were being manufactured in the United States and many were imported from England. Glassware was made all along the Ohio River and was available in Michigan. Now valued by antique collectors, glass items were favorite wedding gifts at the turn of the century. China cabinets were often part of the dining room furniture and here the glassware and china were displayed. Bedroom furniture was large and heavy, and in the guest room the washstand displayed an elaborately decorated chamber set which included a pitcher, washbowl, soap dish and sometimes other pieces. Plain white crockery sets were used at times in the other bedrooms, but in general the family used a tin basin in the kitchen sink for the morning wash.

In 1872 a printed flyer somewhat like a small newspaper first appeared advertising farm equipment that could be ordered and mailed directly to the home. An almost instant success, the flyer grew into the Montgomery Ward and Company catalog. It was joined in the next decade by the Sears Roebuck and Company catalog, and together they became valuable adjuncts to every farmer's home. On cold winter evenings as family members sat around the coal stove, they could peruse the catalogs, often by the light of an elaborate oil lamp. Although few families were without their catalogs, some farm and home equipment was bought not by mail but from the farm implement concerns and furniture stores in Kalamazoo.

A series of new work-saving devices for the home became available, such as the sewing machine, the first models turned by hand and later the treadle type where feet were used leaving both hands free to guide the material. Next came the washing machine, first rocked back and forth by a handle and later made to resemble a wooden tub with a plunger inside that had a handle

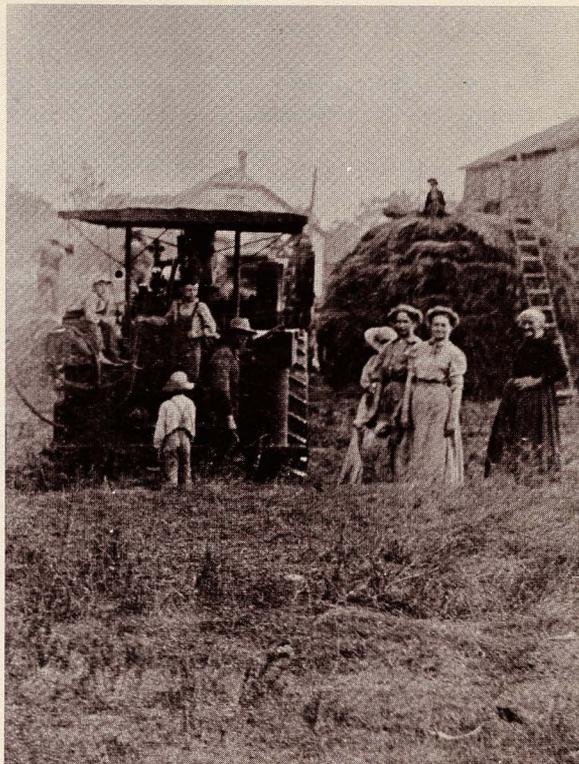
attached to whirl it around. Turning the handle was done by hand but that was much easier than standing over a tub and scrubbing each piece separately on a scrub board. Still later the ice box came into production and much ice for Portage families was supplied by the Osterhouts. Many families had their own icehouses and cutting ice on the Portage lakes was a yearly task.

From the very beginning of the settlement as

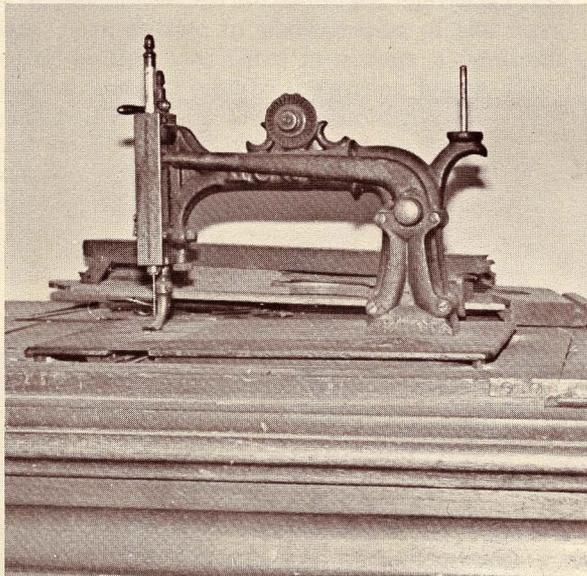


Many sheep were raised on early Portage farms. This picture was taken on the Boylan farm.

Mechanization comes to the Peter Timmer farm.



well as in later years, there was considerable intermarriage among the early pioneer families so that many of them were related. Most members tended to stay in the area, but a few moved to nearby Kalamazoo, Vicksburg and Schoolcraft or towns even further afield. In old letters and

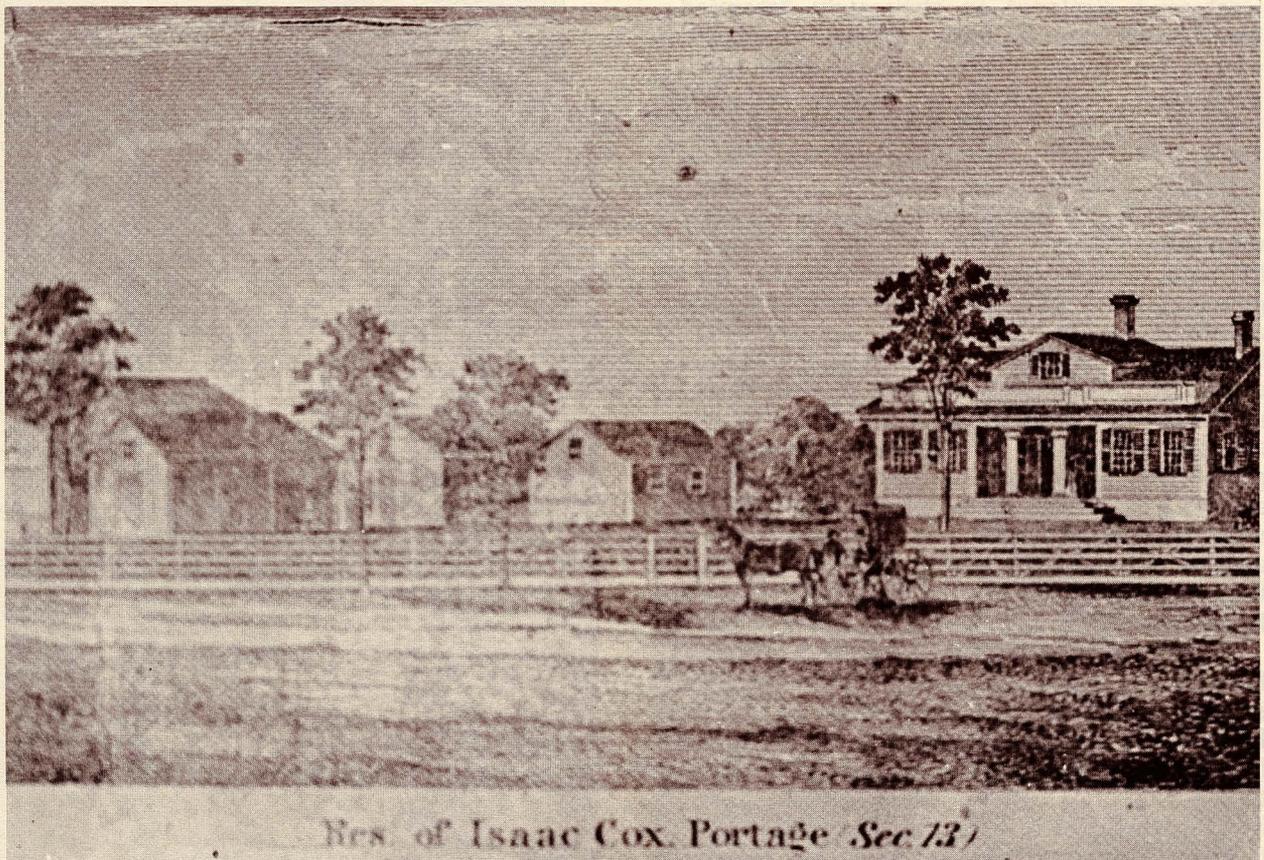


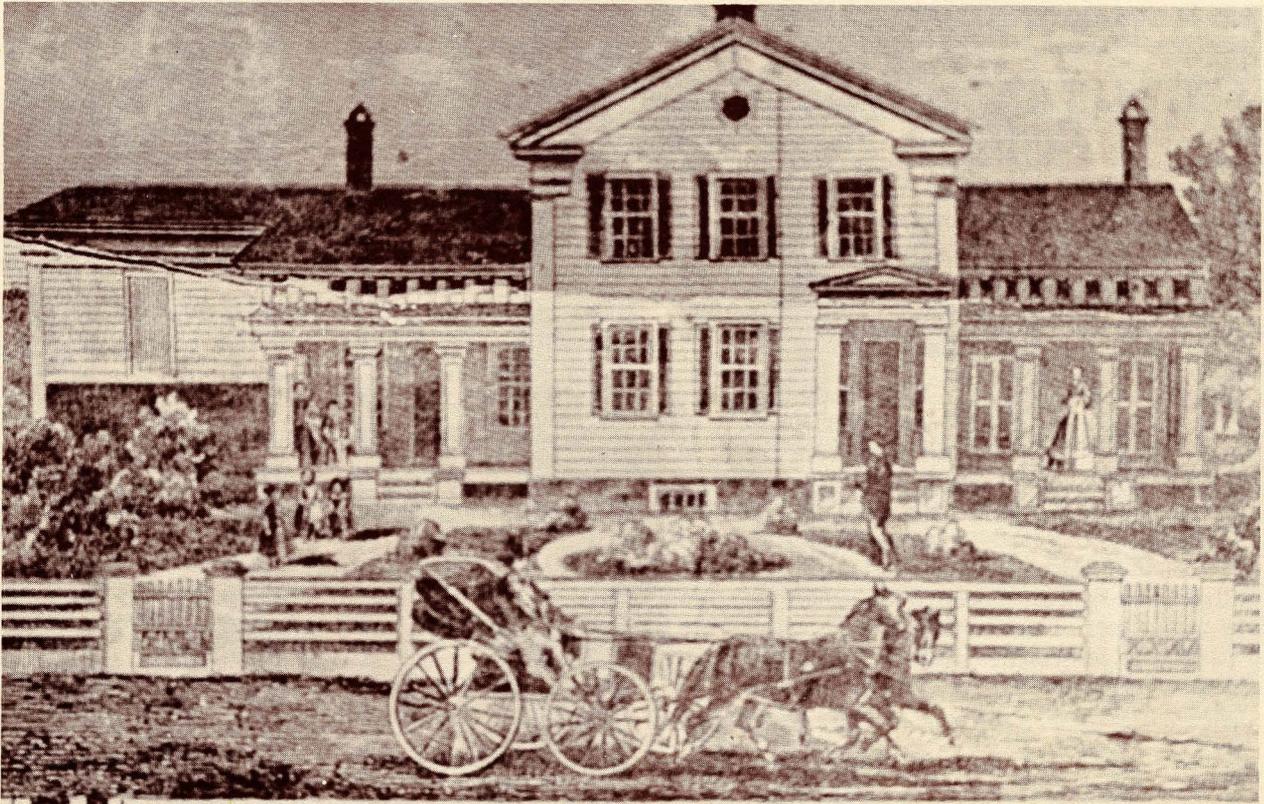
remembrances of a bygone era the writers relate stories of visits made to one another's homes. Perhaps such visits took place on a Sunday afternoon; sometimes a whole day was spent. In the spring, summer and fall, the family traveled the muddy or dusty roads in a horse drawn carriage or buggy. In the spring the trees were leafing out, wild flowers grew along the roads and in the wood lots, and sheep grazed in the fields while their lambs gambled about. In the fall, the fields were filled with mature corn stalks and wheat and oats just beginning to ripen. In winter the sleigh or cutter was used, and nestled under a warm buffalo robe the occupants looked out at the snow covered fields.

No doubt the men discussed the crops being raised, an addition to one of the farm buildings, a new piece of farm equipment, or the purchase of a

Opposite: The Beacon Club as it was pictured on an 1861 county wall map and in the twentieth century when it was the Carney residence.

From an 1861 Kalamazoo County Wall map



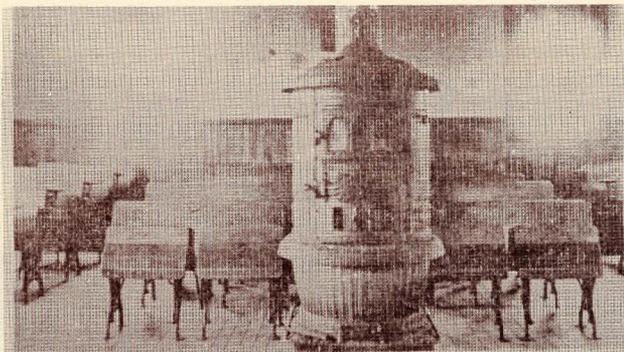


Res. of Jefferson Smith, Portage (Sec. 2)



new horse or cow. The women had their own interests. There were always new recipes to be discussed, new quilts or clothes to be admired, or a quilting bee to be planned to finish a new quilt for a future bride.

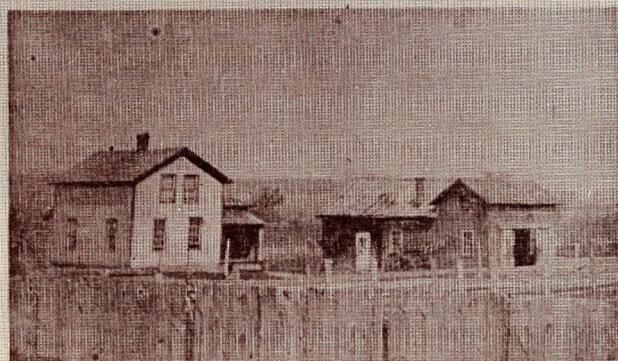
As the twentieth century progressed, further changes began to take place. With the availability of electricity the ice box and hand worked washing machine were outmoded. They were replaced by the refrigerator and the electric washing machine; the electric sewing machine and countless other appliances were developed. In many instances whole farms disappeared. At first they were divided into small holdings, but later farms were subdivided into lots; and houses were built. Many of the first individual houses in Portage were built around the lakes as summer cottages. Later the northern portion of the township began to be platted into individual lots and numerous houses were built. Today farm land is still disappearing and sheep, lambs and milk cows are rarely seen. Now and then a few steers are fattened and few chickens kept, but Portage as an agricultural community belongs to the past.



Portage at Turn of Century

The recent tabloid section of the Gazette devoted to the new city of Portage has brought a number of "new" old pictures to the Gazette from people who had read the historical account of the community. At top is a picture taken inside Portage School No. 5; the brick school which was illustrated in the

tabloid. The date 1900 is inscribed on the back of the pictures. The picture below is described on the back only as "Blacksmith Shop - Residence, Portage Center - From My Window." No date nor additional location is given but it may be recognized by some Portage old-timer.



A gathering of Portage residents in the 1880's - 1890's.





The Smith family on their Portage farm.



The Thompson sisters - Nett, Nell, Minnie and Kate - ca. 1915.



Mr. and Mrs. Scott Ingersoll and sons Clayton and Glenn - 1900.



Don Southwell on the porch of the Portage Grocery Company advertising Portage celery - 1907.

5

The Swampland Becomes Valuable

As the nineteenth century came to a close, a different type of farmer came to Portage. Land that had been more or less ignored by the sheep, corn and wheat farmers began to have a special interest for a group of people who had formerly farmed on swampland in Kalamazoo. For a number of years growing and shipping celery had been a leading enterprise in the city and just beyond the city limits, so much so, in fact, that it was often called the Celery City. Some of the families that came to Portage had rented muck land in Kalamazoo, some had worked for celery farmers and few had been former farm workers in the Netherlands. By the turn of the century the names Cramer, Timmer, Dakema, DeVries, Dontje, Nederhoed, Oudeman, Penning, Schuring, Vermeulen, Vroegindewey, Kannegieter and Wenke appeared on the tax rolls. All were good Holland names and evidently they were all interested in growing celery as their land was located on the marsh land in Portage.

Although it was a Scotsman who grew the first celery in Kalamazoo in 1856, it was a Hollander by the name of Lendert DeBryn who drained and spaded a small piece of marsh land and grew the first celery successfully on drained muck land. The next year four or five other Hollanders prepared some of the wet and peaty soil and the business was launched commercially. By 1900 the Dutch in Kalamazoo controlled the celery market as growers and shippers and over 3000 acres were in production. There were over 200 growers and about 25 shippers. Some of the shippers grew and shipped their own celery whereas the big shippers bought from the growers and shipped to the big hotels in the larger cities. Some of these shippers became very wealthy men.

When the first celery growers appeared in Portage no easy task awaited them. Draining a marsh and making it suitable for planting celery

called for grueling, back breaking work. Although the acreage required to grow a successful and paying crop of celery was far less than needed for general farming, the work required was difficult indeed. To drain the land, long ditches, anywhere from ten to fifteen feet apart, had to be dug by hand all across the fields. It was imperative that the ditches be deep enough and placed in the right position for proper drainage. After the ditches were dug in straight even rows, the space between the ditches had to be cleared by hand, grubbing out the coarse grass, sedges, weeds and bushes. After this was accomplished the marsh had to be drained sufficiently so it could be plowed, cultivated and fertilized. Sometimes the soil was so moist it had to be spaded by hand. This was only the beginning.

Before any celery plants could be grown a greenhouse had to be built near the farm, usually directly behind the home. Many of these early celery growers had to have a home and greenhouse built while they were draining their acres of marsh land. Many of them drained only part of the land at first so they could raise a crop as soon as possible to support their families.

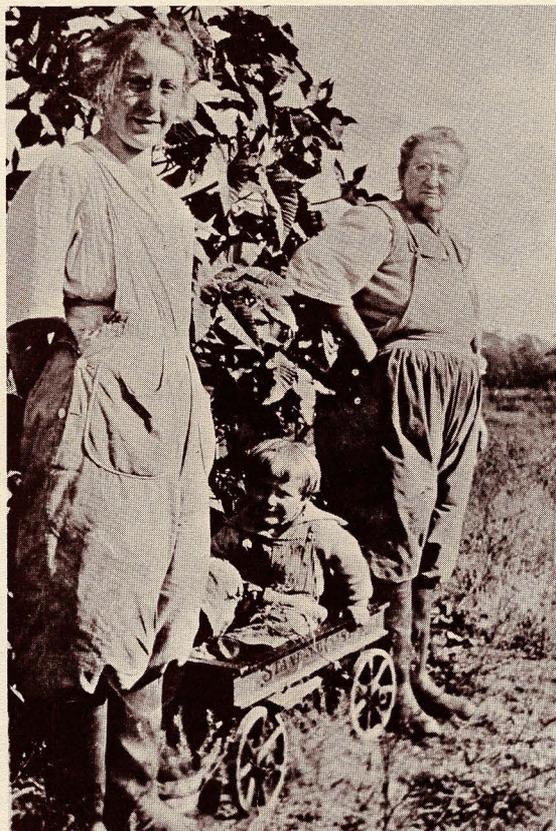
Growing the celery crop began in late February or early March. First the seed was sprouted in shallow tin pans, kept warm near a stove or furnace and watched closely by the farmer. The soil had to be kept moist and at a fairly even temperature. As soon as the seed was sprouted it was transferred to the greenhouse. In those early days the greenhouse was quite a simple affair kept warm by wood and coal burning stoves. If the weather happened to be very cold when the plants were still small the farmer would have to get up during the night to add fuel to the stove. The soil had to be kept moist until the plants were ready to go outdoors.

In the spring, after the danger of frost was

passed and the plants were from two to three inches high, they were carefully plucked from the soil, set upright in shallow pans and transferred to the shallow trenches which the celery grower had prepared. These trenches usually extended the length of the field and were about three inches deep and far enough apart so there was enough room for the farmer to walk between the rows to cultivate the soil. Anyone growing celery took great pride in keeping these rows as straight as an arrow. To get these straight rows a ball of twine was attached to a short stick at one end and stretched across the field to the opposite end, and then the trench was dug with a sharp pointed hoe. An artist's eye for straightness was needed when the trenches were dug. The first planting usually occurred about mid-May.

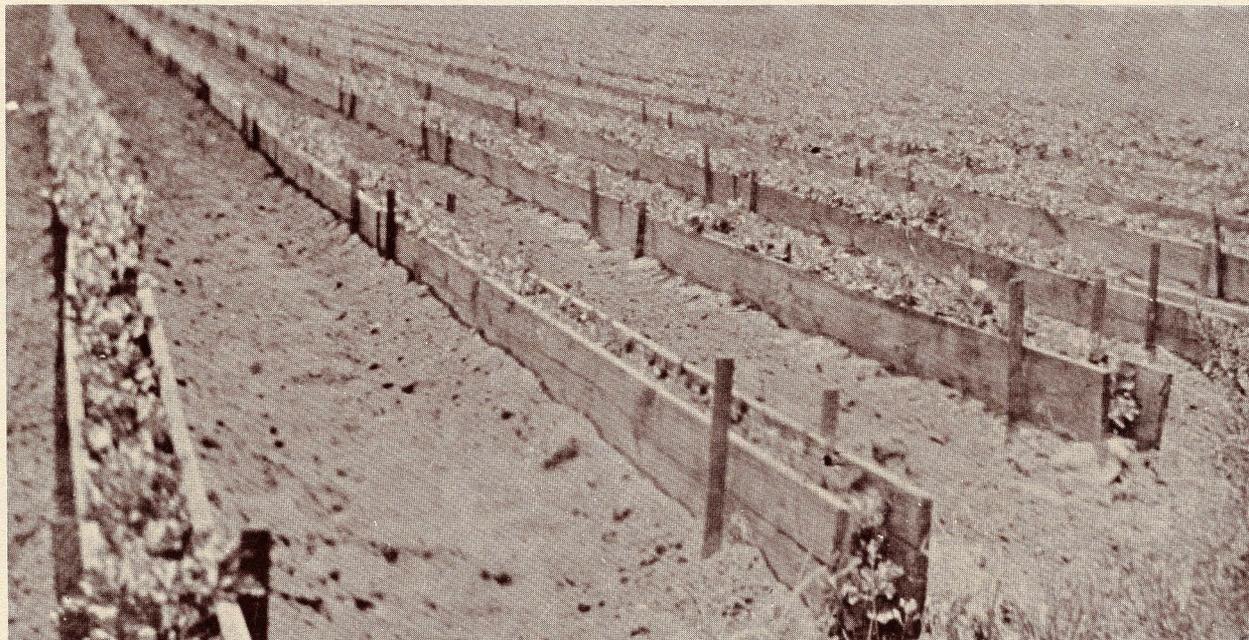
Each little plant was put in separately and a back breaking job this was for the grower. Crawling along on his knees he firmly placed each plant in the trench about five to six inches apart. It was an art to be a good planter. The soil and plants had to be in just the right condition and each plant had to have the soil pressed closely around the roots. As the plants grew the long rows had to be kept free from weeds. Once again the farmer or his helper crept along each row and carefully removed weeds that grew between the plants. This was often done by young boys, either sons of the celery grower or hired help. They had to be instructed carefully how to do this job. Carelessness would harm the plants and cause them to wilt. A cultivator was run between the

rows to keep weeds down. Growing celery was usually a family affair and the more there were in a family the more celery one could grow and sell.



Work in the celery fields was a family affair.

Bleaching boards in place.



When the tiny plants reached a certain height, long boards were placed on each side of the growing plants, held together by clamps or hooks. This would blanch the celery to snowy whiteness and would cause the heart to more fully develop. Blanching took about three weeks, and the farmer hoped for favorable weather so he could begin his first harvest in the beginning of July.

Every farmer had to have what was called a celery shed. This was a small building separate from his barn. In the shed were two long tanks with a pump at one end which filled the tanks daily with clean water. After the farmer undid the hooks that held the planks together he began to pull up the bunches of celery and trim off the roots and the outer stalks with a sharp knife. He then placed them in a wheelbarrow and as soon as it was filled he wheeled it into the shed and put the celery into the first tank. Here help usually awaited him. It was often an adolescent son or daughter, sometimes his wife or hired help if there were no one in the family able to help him. The farmer returned to the field for more celery and the helpers got busy. The stalks were scrubbed clean with a hand brush in the first tank, rinsed in the second one and then placed on a long shelf to be tied into bunches of twelve called *dozens*. The

celery was placed carefully between a rounded frame and then tied securely with twine just below the leaves and again above the roots. It was then ready to be taken to a shipper. At other times, celery was packed in wooden boxes known as *squares*, *highballs* or *flats*, made expressly for this purpose.

After the required amount of celery for the day was removed the boards were carried to one side and piled in neat piles. As the first crop was harvested, the soil was readied for a second planting which was done in between the original rows. This was a busy time indeed. In the very early dawn rows of celery would be harvested and taken to the shipping agencies or express trains,

Celery coquette.



Harvest time in the celery field.

Lonely celery shed still stands on South Westnedge.



and the rest of the day would be spent in plowing, trenching, planting, weeding, placing of boards on newly matured stalks and getting ready for the next day's work.

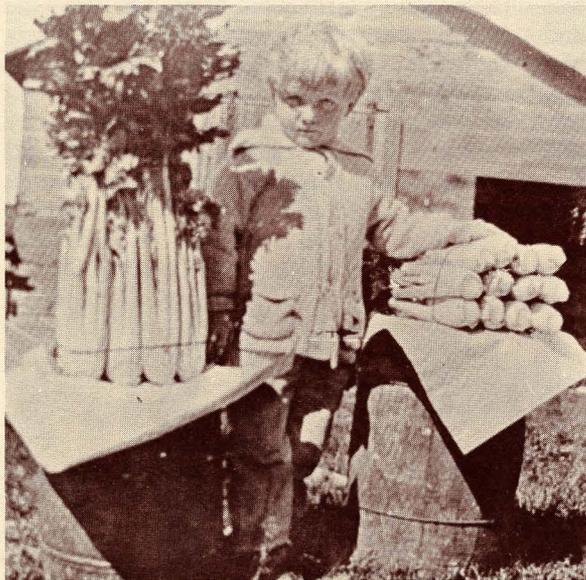
Jennie Medema at age 93 recalls how she and her husband would get up at two o'clock in the

morning and working by lantern light would start digging up the bunches of celery. At daybreak her sons, when they were old enough, would get up to wash and rinse the celery, getting it ready to tie into bunches.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century practically all the marshland in Portage was drained and prepared for growing celery. In the spring some of the growers supplemented their income by growing a few tomato, cabbage and cauliflower plants to sell locally, but the majority raised only celery. In the late 1920's a few started experimenting with pansies for early spring sales.

At first the celery was shipped to other cities by train. The celery farmer had to get the celery to the shippers in time to meet the train schedule. If he shipped directly to the hotels or dealers, the celery had to be boxed or crated and labeled before being taken to the train. Since these were the days before refrigerated cars the Osterhouts and Bacons cut ice during the winter from Gourdneck and West Lakes and supplied much of the ice for the cars. George Bacon actually converted a good sized log cabin on his property into an ice house.

With coming of the automobile all this was changed. When trucks came into general use some of the celery growers acquired trucks and transported hundreds of bunches of celery at a time to nearby midwestern cities. However, another change soon took place. A new type of celery appeared on the market. For years the so called White Plume variety was a prime favorite. It was



Dontje celery ready for market.

Harvest time in the celery field.



crisp, could be bleached very white and kept its freshness well. With the coming of commercial fertilizers this particular kind of celery developed a rust condition that spoiled its pristine whiteness. Since horses were used less and less, sufficient manure was hard to come by so chemical fertilizer had to be used. The new variety of celery was being grown very successfully in California. It was called pascal, the kind of celery we are so familiar with today. Besides being free from rust it was more easily grown and did not need boards to bleach it.

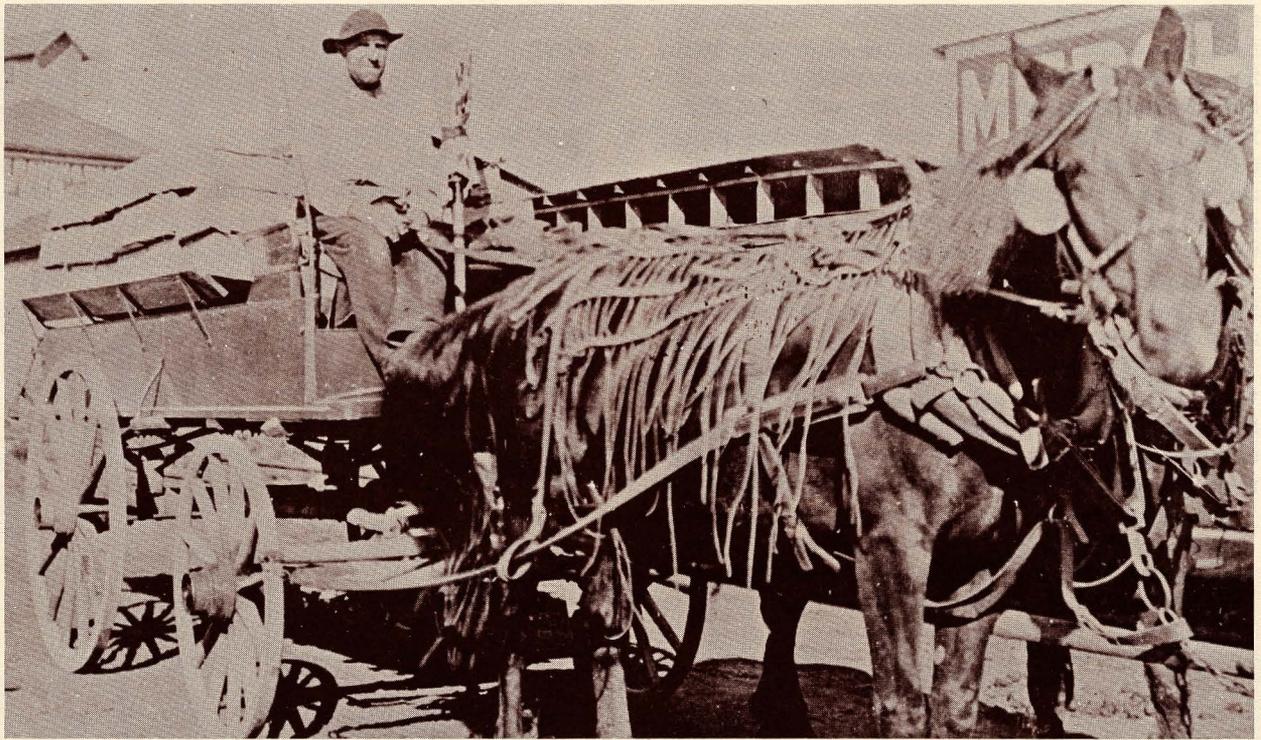
There was a wide variety of other changes which contributed to a gradual decrease in celery farming in Portage, including some more general changes in the society at large. In order to maintain a profitable operation, the farmer needed

to buy more muck land as well as the mechanized equipment required to farm the larger area. Some of the muck land began to dry out to the extent that it needed some type of irrigation during the summer. Then, too, some of the older celery growers began to think about retiring and their children did not particularly care to assume the role of celery farmer. The vast social upheaval of World War II was an important influence on the young people as, indeed, it was on the whole society. Gradually some of the earlier farmers began to dispose of their holdings. Some left Portage altogether; some retired in their homes which lined Westnedge Avenue from Milham to Centre Avenues and Centre Avenue from Oakland Drive to Portage Road; and some went into other businesses.



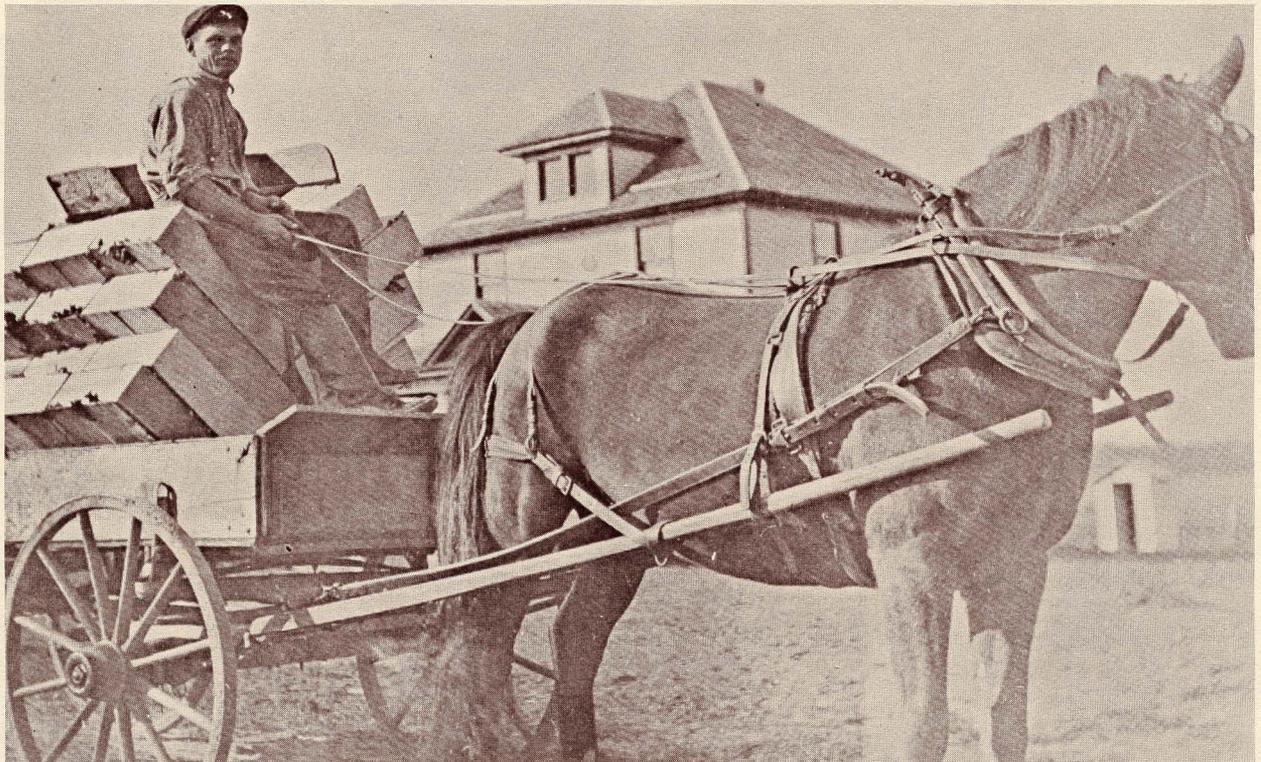
Farmers banking celery in the field in fall for late harvest.





Mr. Nederhoed and celery. Logan's Feed Mill in background.

Gar de Vries on celery wagon in front of the Fletcher home.



Some of the muck land that was sold was soon filled in with gravel and buildings erected on the spot where celery once grew. This happened to the Dontje and Byholt celery farms which contained the land where Portage Plaza now stands. John Byholt had for years been secretary-treasurer of the Portage Celery Growers Association. This group was formed when the growers shipped by train in refrigerated cars. One advantage of this type of cooperative was the ability to buy manure by the carload at a better price from the Chicago stockyard. All four of the Byholt's children still live in Portage as well as a number of their grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Just as the pioneers had done almost a century before, the celery growers who remained increased their holdings. The Schurings acquired a number of farms in various sections; the Romences added acreage as did the DeBruyns. The Romences, Schrams, Schurings, Hoeksemas and Elzingas seemed to be the forerunners in building the huge greenhouses we see dotting Portage today. No longer do they get up to stoke the stoves in the wee, small hours of the morning. Today these superb buildings are heated by gas, but in only one greenhouse can celery plants be seen growing inside on smooth, warm muck.

Today the Posthumus brothers still grow several acres of celery on Garden Lane. About the only hand labor required is setting out the small plants in the greenhouse sometime in February. In about mid-May the seedlings are planted out of doors but no longer by hand. Now a small planter seating two people moves rhythmically down two rows at a time. With a pressure of the foot the plant drops down and is pressed into the black soil. Weeds are dealt with by mechanical spraying, and in August when the harvest is due a large machine travels along the rows. The bunches are dug up, tossed into a large container in the front

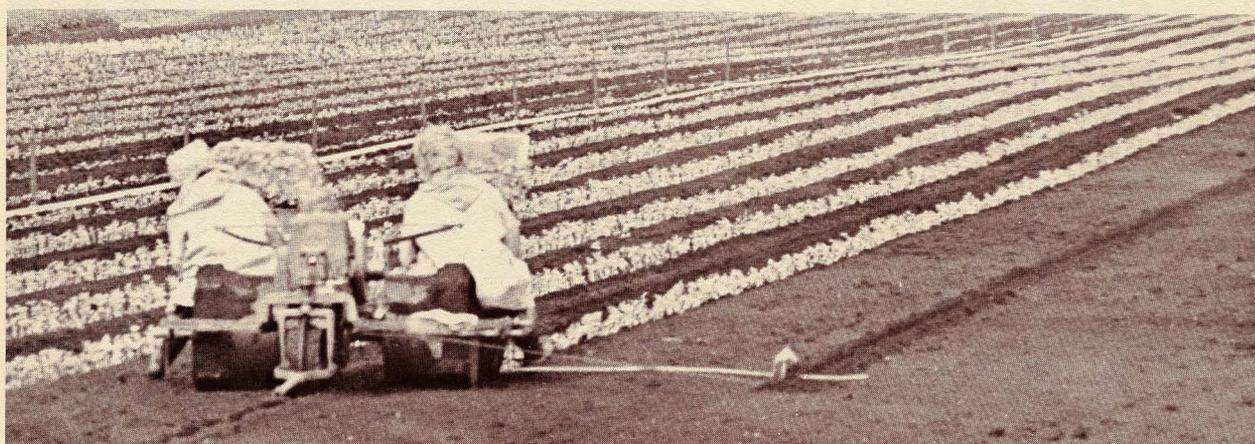
and taken to a barn rather than a shed. Here they are dropped into water which flows continuously, and the water is agitated sufficiently to wash the celery. After being thoroughly rinsed, the bunches are tossed into a very large revolving tray. As the wire tray whirls around, men on the opposite side lift off the bunches and pack them into crates to be shipped to their destination. The outside of each bunch looks beautifully clean but as one pulls off a stalk at home the bit of black soil adhering to the stalk may be a bit of Portage muck.

This last celery growing is not the only farming operation occurring on the muck lands of Portage. The other large greenhouses, including those of the Posthumus brothers, contain thousands of plants. These include tomato, cabbage, cauliflower, collard and other vegetable plants. Be-



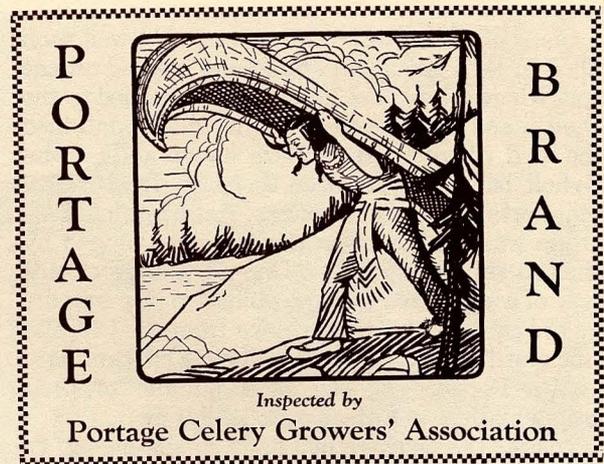
Waterwheel on the Dontje celery farm.

Celery planting the modern way - spring 1975.



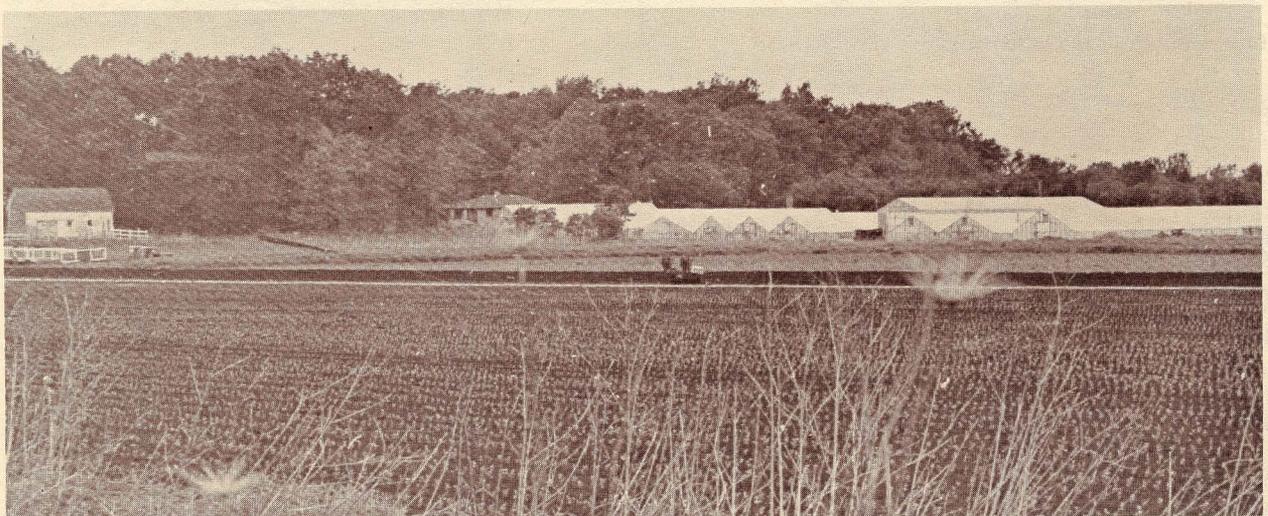
sides all the vegetable plants there are thousands of annuals which give color to flower gardens in dozens of states. It would be difficult to estimate how many thousand plants are grown in Portage. The Schrams, Romences, Hoeksemas and Elzingas do a large retail business, but many growers, like the Schurings, sell wholesale and truck their plants to hundreds of cities, many going to Chicago and Detroit. There are six Elzinga brothers still growing plants in Portage. Of course, the Romence Nursery operates all year, and it offers many house plants to give color to homes during the winter. Coming from Grand Rapids as celery growers in the early part of this century, the Romences turned to raising plants at a comparatively early date. They now operate one of the largest nurseries in this area.

A few growers begin their work in November and by February start sending their plants to the far south. The rest of the flowers are usually started about December with the bulk of the shipping coming from late April through early June. All the plants are fitted into small plastic boxes, usually four to six to a box. The boxes are then placed in a plastic tray called a flat, usually sixteen boxes to a flat, and the flats are fitted into shelves on huge trucks. Each small box has drainage holes in the bottom but the trays are solid. In this way the plants can be watered and the soil kept moist. The growers who sell pansies begin in late summer to start their plants and set them out in the fields. Pansies are rather hardy plants and in autumn they often bloom and turn a field into a riot of color. However, they must be covered during the winter or the plants will freeze. In early spring they are dug and placed in containers ready to go to market. They are one of the earliest flowers to appear on the scene in the spring. Their faces of many colors are a welcome sight after a long winter.



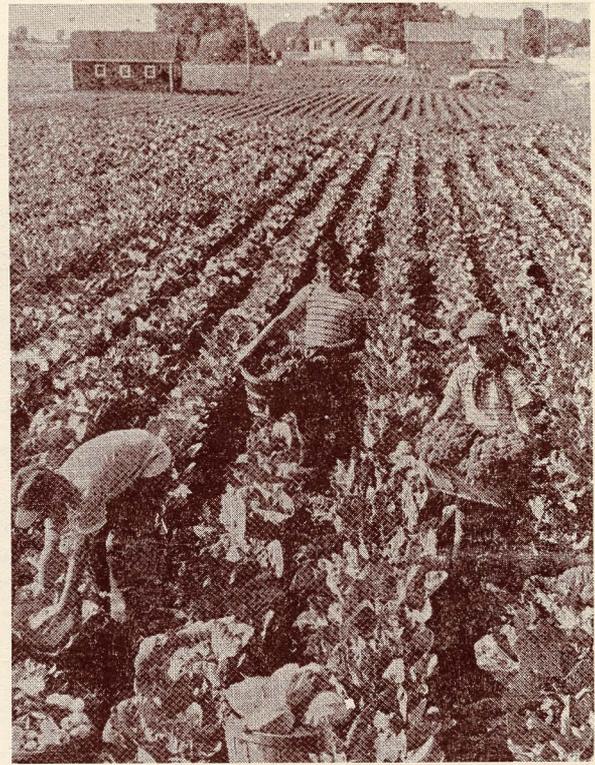
Seven little Dutchmen - photo from the Hoeksema album.

A few of Portage's many greenhouses.



As with the early settlers of Portage there has been a good deal of inter-marriage among the celery growers. There are very few of the descendants who do not claim uncles and aunts, cousins or second cousins still living in Portage. Many have gone into other businesses or professions. The Schuring family, one of the early growers with a large plant and flower business, today have greatly increased their holdings. The family is connected with a number of different enterprises.

In a growing city such as Portage, how long will the greenhouses remain? It is already unusual to see Black Angus grazing in the green fields of spring or tall corn waving in the wind in summer. Even today new roads are being built through recently productive farmland. There are several new areas being platted, soon to be sold as lots. The black muck is still being filled with tons of gravel. Portage Plaza, which was once a celery field, is now covered with buildings. The super-market located there can no longer rely on local growers to supply it with enough fresh Portage celery to meet the demand.



Mint pickers from the A.M. Todd Co. at work on the Dontje farm.

Celery gives way to other vegetable crops in Portage fields - ca. 1940.





6

Portage Schools

Michigan became a state in 1837, one of the several states carved out of the Northwest Territory. The previous year Lewis Cass, the Territorial Governor, had appointed John D. Pierce to devise a series of rules and regulations to govern all the publicly supported schools in Michigan. Both men were committed to free education for all children. After traveling to New England to inspect schools and interview the leading educators of the day, Mr. Pierce wrote a lengthy report detailing the regulations which he and Mr. Cass felt would provide the best education for every child in Michigan. The first elected legislature accepted this report, and Governor Stevens T. Mason appointed Mr. Pierce as the first superintendent of public instruction.

One of Mr. Pierce's first official acts was to begin auctioning off Section 16 in the various townships of the counties in Michigan. The Ordinance of 1787 stipulated that the money obtained from the 640 acres in every Section 16 would go to the state to be known as the Primary School Fund. All interest from the fund was to be distributed among the public schools on a per pupil basis. Mr. Pierce first disposed of the sections in his own county of Calhoun. He then moved on to Kalamazoo County. When he reached Section 16 in Portage, he encountered one of the most undesirable sections in the township. Sandy, hilly, marshy, mosquito-infested, full of brambles and snakes, it was a far cry from what the pioneers wanted for farm land.

A small area on the south side of the section with several acres of high ground was purchased by Asa Ingersoll to add to his farm on Oakland Drive. Two lots of this property are still owned by one of his descendants, Don Ingersoll, but the old farmhouse is gone. Only the well site remains.

The rest of the section was sold to various speculators until the celery farmers came to drain the marsh. Some of the largest landholders in Portage owned large pieces of land in Section 16, including Isaac Brooks, Ebenezer Durkee and Daniel Lathrop. When the stagecoach came through the township after the construction of the plank road, Lathrop built a hotel on part of his land and the tollhouse was located nearby.

Bounded by Centre Avenue, Westnedge Avenue, Romence Road and a line just west of Rockford Street, Section 16 is perhaps one of the most interesting sections in today's Portage. Saint Catherine of Siena Catholic Church is located on Centre Avenue with homes nearby which are surrounded by the trees once part of the wood lots belonging to the Cooleys, Abbots and Ingersolls. Running through the middle of the section is Schuring Road with a number of homes and large greenhouses where thousands of plants are grown every year. Where once the celery plants grew, Portage Plaza now houses a number of business firms. On Shaver Road are the city hall, the police station and Portage City Park. From the top of Sandy Ridge Road, Woodland School may be seen with its sandy playground. Vacant land is still found along Westnedge Avenue and Romence Road, but soon the remaining marsh lands will be covered with sand and gravel. There still stands one lonely celery shed on Westnedge Avenue near Romence Road, but nearby construction now threatens to destroy this monument to an era which belongs to history.

Long before all these changes took place in Section 16, the first pioneers of Portage had established two schools. It is difficult to determine which school came first. In the meager information available, claims are made that both

Elijah Root and Caleb Sweetland started classes in their homes in 1832 or 1833, both dates being quoted in old histories. It is stated that Caleb Sweetland hired the first teacher, Rufus Rice from Vermont, and that he taught the settlers' children in Mr. Sweetland's log house. His students would have included the families of the neighboring Howards, Wattles, Kinnes and Brooks. Perhaps Mr. Root's own daughter taught school in their home as she later became a teacher in one of the district schools. Her students would have included the families of the nearby Harrisons, Woodards, Stones and Meyers. The following year Mr. Root built a crude schoolhouse on the south side of Milham Avenue, east of Portage Road, and this became District No. 1 school. In 1856 the building was replaced by a brick schoolhouse known as Indian Fields School. Allan Milham, great grandson of pioneer William Milham, relates that he attended this school as well as his father, brother, sisters, aunts and uncles. Although Milham no longer lives in Portage, he owns two houses in the city and a sizeable farm still being worked. His son lives in Portage and his two grandsons attend Northern High School. The grandsons are also descendants of pioneer Joseph Beckley, who was their great, great, great grandfather.

Soon after District No. 1 school was built,

Caleb Sweetland erected District No. 3 schoolhouse on the northwest corner of Milham Avenue and Angling Road. It was later known as the Brooks School, no doubt named for Isaac Brooks, who owned practically a whole section of land on the south side of Milham Avenue. Members of the families of later settlers who recall attending this school include the Bishops, Daileys, Henwoods, Gibbs, Hartmans and Derhammers. These settlers often called it Dailey School.

A short time after the Brooks school was built, District No. 2 was organized. The schoolhouse was located on the corner of Milham Avenue and Westnedge Avenue, called Carpenter's Corners at that time and now the location of Southland Mall. For many years it was known as Carpenters Corners School. Some of our present day citizens recall attending this school including Herschel Kilgore, Paul Romence and Carl Snow. Later the school was sold, converted into a house and occupied at one time by the Paul Romence family. Several years ago the house was moved to Oakland Drive and Kalarama Avenue where it was again remodeled and may be seen today.

Herschel Kilgore has an interesting booklet printed in 1921 which lists the fifty-three District No. 2 students as well as the teachers for that year. The eighth grade graduating class number-



Picture-Taking Time...

It is believed this picture was taken about 1888 in front of Portage school No. 5. In the back row (second from left) is Clayton Ingersoll who was born in 1830 and died in Portage in 1954. Mrs. Clayton Ingersoll lives at 729 Schuring. The fifth person (l to r) in back row—wearing glasses—

is Mrs. Edna Frick, 85, who now lives in a nursing home in Schoolcraft. She had been Mrs. Edna Tripp. Her maiden name was Wood. Second boy from left on ground is Floyd Akerson.



TAKEN IN 1899...

This may bring back many memories for pioneer Portage citizens. This photo was loaned to The Portage Herald by Mrs. Tony Zwart (Helen Timmer) of Portage. The shot was taken in 1899 in front of the Portage school. In some cases identifications are made with maiden and married names and in other cases—just maiden names. Bottom row, left to right, Anna Thole, Helen De Vries Gernaat, Helen Timmer Zwart, Beulah

Hawley and Hazel Wood Dontje. Second row, Cornelius and Charles Dontje (twins), Glenn Bauierla, Peter De Haan, John De Haan, John Linneman and Edith Hawley. Third row, Garrett De Vries, Richard Dykstra, Elizabeth Timmer Bouma, Elizabeth De Vries, Lela Wood Dustin and Lucy Donje Ide. Last row, Mrs. Carlton, Arthur Sherman, teacher, Miss Ella Carlton and Herb De Vries.

ed four, including Carl Snow and his close friend, Steven Gibbs. While attending high school and Kalamazoo College together, they drove the farm truck each day to a dairy in Kalamazoo to leave the cans of milk and picked up the empty cans before returning home from school.

Kilgore, his two brothers and his cousins all attended the District No. 2 school. He is a direct descendant of pioneer settlers and he lives on part of the farm acquired by his ancestors between 1830 and 1840. Originally John Kilgore, Herschel's great grandfather, purchased a large tract of land on the north side of Kilgore Road. A little later he bought more land on the south side, some extending south to Milham Avenue and including, to the west, the present site of Loy Norrix High School. Herschel's grandfather inherited the part of the original farm where Herschel is living today on Lovers Lane. The house was built by his grandfather but Herschel retains only twenty acres of land from the old farm. Both his sons live in Portage, one on part of the old farm. His grandchildren attend Portage Schools. The Osterhouts, descendants of Vaydor Pierce, also have grandchildren in the Portage Schools as do the Matteson descendants.

District No. 7 had been established shortly

after Carpenter's Corners school was started. There is no record of the dates when Districts No. 4, No. 5 and No. 6 were established but District No. 8 was the last one organized. The children in this district had been attending Fractional District No. 1 school in Texas Township and the parents wanted a school nearer to their homes. In 1856 Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Booth gave one half acre of their farm as the site for a new schoolhouse. The Rockwell and Bonfoey families were instrumental in getting the school established. When the building was no longer used for school purposes, it served as a residence for several families before being purchased by its present owner, Gordon Bozell. The schoolhouse, now vacant, still stands in its original location on Oakland Drive just south of Shaver Road.

There are very few citizens in Portage today who recall the early district schools, but even the schools they attended must have been modern compared with the first ones built by Mr. Root and Mr. Sweetland. There were no blackboards in those early schools; a crude wood-burning stove supplied the heat; and the rough floor was swept by the teacher everyday with a rush broom. The children supplied their own slate and slate pencil and bought their own readers. The older students

were required to furnish their own copy books usually put together from foolscap paper. Every morning the teacher carefully wrote a sentence or

two at the top of the page with a quill point pen. During the day the students were required to make a precise copy. The pens were sharpened by the teacher. Good penmanship and skill in sharpening quills were prime requisites for a teacher, and often adults in the community asked the teacher to sharpen quills for them. Goose quills came from the Netherlands and cost five cents a dozen.

At first a rate system was used to supplement the always insufficient primary fund money so that the teacher could be paid and a few supplies purchased. Each family would pay a prorated amount per pupil and contribute a fair share of wood to heat the school. The wood was to be cut and neatly stacked by mid-November. In later years bids were let to see which farmer would charge the least for his wood and he would supply all the wood for the winter.

In order to obtain primary fund money, school had to be kept for at least three months a year. Schools were usually held in the winter when the children were not required to work on the farm. The winter term began after Thanksgiving and continued from thirteen to fifteen weeks. School



Indian Fields School (District No. 1) built in 1856.

The Brooks School - District No. 3.



was in session five and one half days a week. The teacher in charge had to be qualified or no primary fund money would be forthcoming. A qualified teacher was anyone who completed the eighth grade in a district or graded school and who later passed the examination issued by the state superintendent of instruction. This examination was conducted by the elected school inspector, known as the director. In addition, a teacher had to be a person of high principles, excellent morals and completely honest. If a candidate passed all the requirements, he or she was given a certificate for one term, lasting from three to four months. In 1865 the average salary in Portage for three months of school was about \$40.00 for a male teacher and about \$17.00 for a female teacher.

As part of the school laws of 1785 and 1837 provision was made for a library in each district. The state provided a certain amount of money for books to be distributed to the various districts in accordance with the number of children in school. All people residing in the district could borrow books providing they followed the rules set up by the state. Although the money issued was a small amount, it did establish a precedent for school libraries and it helped to provide reading material for early settlers. The amount for some districts would barely pay for one book today, but in earlier days books cost from only five to twenty-five cents each.

By 1859 it was found that many of the laws adopted by the first legislature did not work. A complete set of new laws was written by John Gregory, Superintendent of Public Instruction, and adopted by the legislature. This was a lengthy, involved set of directions for all types of government supported schools. It gave full instructions on how to set up a primary school, how to meet expenses and how to teach. Because of the numerous reports on school operations which the new laws required districts to make to both the county and state, Mr. Gregory compiled a lengthy school district record book where all kinds of records and statistics could be entered for reporting at the end of the year. According to a recent book by a former state superintendent, these reports are still on file in Lansing.

There are only three of the old district school records available in Portage, but they give some very interesting facts. One begins in 1865 and continues into the twentieth century. In addition to the district record book there was a daily attendance book and a detailed course of study. Each subject was handled in detail and no child was supposed to be promoted until each subject was mastered. On the inside of the cover it stated that every teacher should be supplied with the book "How to Teach a Country School," which cost \$1.00. A copy of this book could not be located.

As a rule only one school board meeting was held during the year unless some emergency arose. At these meetings the board decided the length of the school year, whether to hire a male or female teacher, salary to be paid, how much to collect from the rate bill to supplement the primary fund and how much wood to buy from the lowest bidder. The budget was decided on including a small amount for incidentals, usually between \$8.00 and \$10.00. During one year, minutes showed that these incidentals included a yearly cleaning woman for the school at \$3.00, a box of chalk for \$.25, a new broom for \$.40 to \$.50, a new tin dipper for \$.20 and a water pail for \$.40. Besides these incidental expenses money had to be voted for school repairs, usually made necessary by the work of vandals. Broken windows, broken steps, and damaged siding were included almost every year. The repairs were



William and Francis Kilgore. William was the son of pioneer John Kilgore and the grandfather of Portage resident, Herschel Kilgore.

The Allan Milham farm at Sprinkle and Bishop.



often done by the board members but materials had to be purchased. Twice the boys were caught and the parents were requested to pay \$1.00 each. Vandalism seemed to be a problem in the nineteenth century as well as today.

Salaries varied little from 1865 to well into the 1870's. One particular school usually employed a female teacher. In 1865 she was paid \$40.00 for the winter term and \$2.50 a week for a fourteen week spring term. In 1871 two large families moved into the district and forty children at-

tended school, five of them boys of seventeen who came during the winter term. An additional teacher seemed in order. The board decided to hire a male teacher whose salary started at \$86.00 a term in 1872 and climbed to \$125.00 by 1878. The female teacher received \$42.00 for the spring term and advanced to \$52.00 by 1878. That year the two new families left and a female teacher was



*Carpenters Corners School (District No. 2) - ca. 1917.
Below: several years later.*



Carpenters Corners School was converted into this house and later moved to its present location on Oakland Drive.





The old brown frame schoolhouse (District No. 5) at Centre and Westnedge - ca. 1879. Standing from left are Priscilla Donahue, Minnie Bacon Geddes, Grace Thompson Garlick, Libbie Reid, Bessie Hawkins Bennett, Mary White Patterson, Miss Emma Averill (teacher), Mabel Bacon Munger, Clara Durkee Austin and 4 younger children including Vida Thompson Smith and Bess Thompson Southwell. Seated boys include Eddie Pike, Francis Donahue and Sherman Fox.

This picture has been identified as District No. 5 school.



hired for both terms at \$56.00 a term. In 1884 the teacher was paid \$60.00, and the board decided to pay \$24.00 a term for her board so that she could stay with one family instead of moving from family to family as a guest which had been customary. In 1890 her salary increased to \$154.00 but she had to pay her own board. By 1900 she received \$290.00 a term and the board bought a new school bell. Another twenty-five years would pass before boards of education began to think of equalizing salaries for men and women.

In 1867 the legislature passed another new school law. No longer could the director give the examinations and inspect the school for good teaching. From then on each county hired a superintendent who was responsible for examining the teachers at the county seat. Besides giving and correcting the exams, he visited every district school in the county and was responsible for all yearly reports from the schools. At his county office these reports were placed on file and a condensed copy sent to Lansing. Portage had eight district schools at this time.

As the nineteenth century drew to a close the winds of change were evident all along the marshlands. Soon after the Timmer and the Oudema families arrived in 1885, at least eight other Dutch families bought from three to five acres of land along Westnedge Avenue and Centre Avenue. Others, including the Schuring family, acquired land on the lane which is now Schuring Road. Celery raising had come to Portage. New homes began going up; and because many of the celery farmers had sizeable families, the little red brick school known as District No. 5 was soon

bursting at the seams. The school board had to act, but money was scarce. First board members rented the Grange Hall and then the Celery Growers Association building to use as classrooms. When these two buildings began to be overcrowded, they again knew something must be done. As luck would have it, a nearby school of higher learning was having problems in finding room for its student teachers. In 1920 Dwight Waldo, president of the Western State Normal College, now Western Michigan University, came to a board meeting of the Portage Center District No. 5 school. He proposed a cooperative arrangement whereby District No. 5 school would become one of the teacher training centers of the normal school and Western, in turn, would hire and pay for the teachers and the equipment for a new school. The board would pay for the new school building from tax money received in the district. All state aid and primary fund money would go to the normal school to help pay the teachers' and principal's salaries and buy furniture. After obtaining approval from the State Department of Public Instruction, the three board members then had to gain approval by the citizens of their first bond issue. Little did they know at that time what an avalanche of such issues would follow. The citizens were responsive and the board began looking for a suitable site. Immediately following the purchase of five acres of land on Westnedge Avenue south of Centre Avenue, an advertisement for bids for a new school was placed in the Kalamazoo Gazette. In the fall of 1922 the Portage Agricultural School opened with five teachers and 183 students.

Cleora Skinner served both as superintendent and teacher and Lewis Crawford combined the duties of principal and teacher. Miss Skinner and Mr. Crawford received \$130.00 a month and Anne Lubke, Vera Pickard and Marian Hall, the other three teachers, received \$90.00 a month each.

District No. 7 School on Bacon Road, now the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Daniels. Mrs. Daniels was the teacher at the school.



The last District No. 5 School.



Because Mr. Crawford was a man, he received the same salary as the superintendent reflecting the continued difference in salary rate between men and women.

During that first year two districts were annexed, changing the new school's name to the Portage Consolidated Agricultural School, and soon an addition was made to the building. The following September, 1923, there were 278 students and kindergarten was added. For the first two weeks, the kindergarten children and teachers sat on the floor because the chairs had not arrived. A home economics department was organized and it, in turn, launched a hot lunch program. Once again the enrollment increased and the Celery Growers Association building was rented as before for \$50.00 a semester. By 1925 enrollment of students increased to well over 300, and again the board had to decide whether to enlarge the building. At about this time, District No. 7 petitioned the board for annexation to Portage Consolidated Agricultural School. The school on Bacon Road had for some years been troubled with its water supply and because one board member felt it was not fit to drink the board decided to seek annexation so that students could

attend the Portage Agricultural School. Another desirable result of annexation would be the opportunity to attend high school in the district without paying tuition. In previous years stu-



District No. 8 School on Oakland Drive as it looks today.

District No. 8 School - spring of 1926.





First P.T.A. organized November 20, 1925. Top row from left: Anna Lubke and Marion Hall; center row from left: Mrs. G. H. Huizenga and Fred Folkertsma; bottom row from left: Mrs. H. B. Sweetland and Mrs. L. F. Bremer.

dents had attended high school in Kalamazoo. Merrill Bacon recalls how he rode his bicycle to the Portage depot, boarded an early train and then walked to Central High School from the station in Kalamazoo. In the afternoon he had to be excused fifteen minutes early to catch the train going home.

The Portage board approved the annexation, but Western State Normal College and the State Board of Education would not give their consent. After considerable discussion each board decided to float a bond issue. Both issues were passed by the voters enabling Portage Agricultural School to purchase three acres of adjoining land and District No. 7 to purchase a new site on Portage Road. In 1928 another addition was completed for the Agricultural School, and District No. 7 decided to call its new two-room school Lake Center Primary School.

The next few years were relatively uneventful with both schools attempting to improve the quality of education offered. Neither one realized what the future would bring nor how they would grow. Lake Center had the most difficulty in meeting its budget from year to year. The extra two mills voted each year were never quite enough to meet added expenses including coal instead of wood for the larger building, extra pay to one of

THIS IS WESTERN NORMAL'S NEW FIVE ROOM PRACTICE SCHOOL



the teachers for performing janitorial duties, and increased teacher salaries which in 1930 were \$90.00 a month for a nine month school year. In addition school money was tied up in the old school until 1931 when it was purchased by Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence Daniels. The Daniels still live in the little school on Bacon Road where Mrs. Daniels once served as teacher.

Although Western State Normal College continued to pay the salaries of the teachers, Portage Agricultural School had many more expenses running a high school. Programs were continually being expanded; three bus drivers and a janitor were now employed; it was necessary to buy coal from the Mein Coal Company for the furnace which replaced the wood burning stoves; and gas, oil and repair bills for the buses came regularly from Gemrich's Garage. More children appeared every September when school opened which contributed dramatically to increased expenses. In ten years the enrollment increased by almost 200 and in 1932, when the enrollment reached 381,

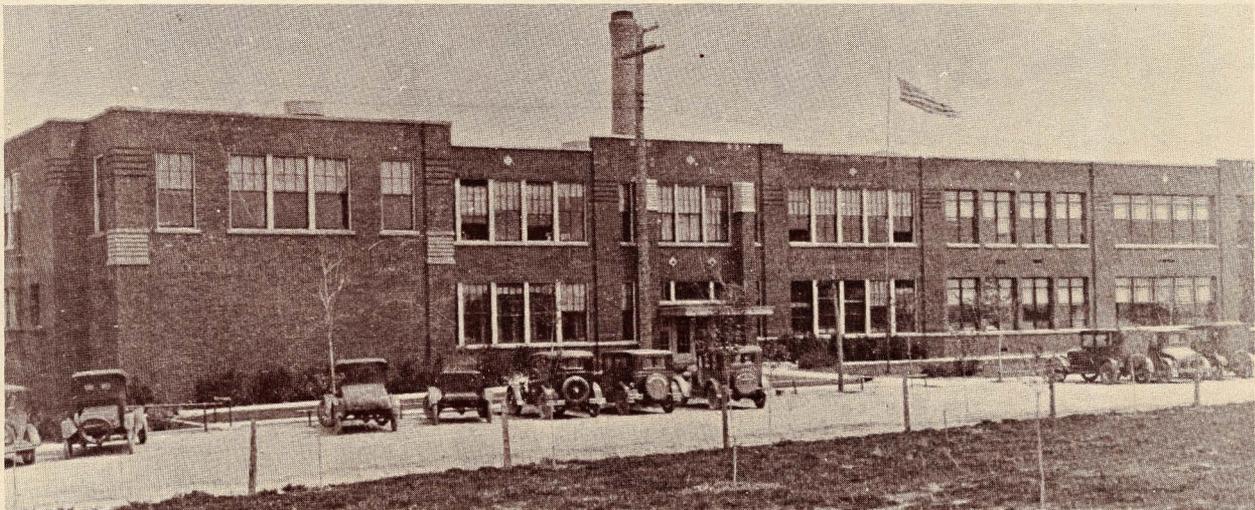


Coach P. J. Dunn's 1926 basketball squad. That year organized baseball was also played by both boys and girls.

Portage Agricultural School's first Board of Education (from left to right): C. H. Fletcher, president; A. L. Snow, secretary; Harm Schuring, treasurer; H. B. Sweetland and George Chipman, trustees.



Portage Agricultural School in the mid-twenties.





First Home Ec Class...

Home Ec for boys is not a new concept. Members of this 1933 class were (back from left) Lowell Matteson, Claus Schuring, Olin Kinney, Dick Dykstra and (front from left) Henry DeVries, Floyd Pond, Ed Lamson, Mrs. Herbs (teacher), Harold Derhammer, Henry Dedie and Bert Wilson.



there were eighteen teachers and six members on the board of education.

It was fortunate that throughout this period of growing pains the parents were very supportive of the school system. It seemed at times like one happy family. Every year the parents, teachers and children had a huge picnic at Summer Home Park on Long Lake. Miss Skinner relates rather an interesting story about these picnics. The teachers and superintendent had decided to alter-

nate the picnics between Summer Home and Ramona Park. When the manager at Ramona Park refused to close the bar, Summer Home was chosen for the yearly outing. Miss Skinner stated she absolutely refused to face any possibility of "her children" returning home drunk. Miss Marian Hall recalls that the teachers rented all the rowboats available so the older children could go for a boat ride. She wondered what would happen if the teachers did this today. It is doubtful that



Mother's Club - February, 1932.

Bus transportation has changed since early driver Porter Matteson posed with his charges.



WEATHER
FAIR-WARM

EVENING
EDITION

Portage Basketball Gazette

VOL. 1. PORTAGE, MICH. MARCH 23, 1933. NO. 1

PORTAGE TEAMS HONORED

43 Straight Wins P. T. A. Sponsors Banquet

Such has been the record of the basketball teams of the last two years. The game lost to Stevensville was the second out of 64 games played. What team will beat this record?

Trophy Case Available Soon

The Basketball Gazette takes great pleasure in announcing the gift of the Class of 1932.

Each class which graduates leaves some gift to its Alma Mater. The proceedings of the last meeting of the Class of 1932 show that they left their money to be used for a trophy case. After the purchase of the case, the balance of the money will go to the school radio fund.

The trophies have become quite numerous as each team has brought in its share. The question of "Where shall we put it?" will not long have to be asked because in the near future the vision of the Class of '32 will be realized.

PORTAGE HEARS WELL

Many well known speakers have contributed generously of their time and talents by participating actively in our banquet programs. We appreciate their help.

1932--Dr. Ernest Burnham
1929--Mr. Judeon Hyames
1921--Dr. William McCracken
1920--Mr. John C. Hoekje
1929--Dr. D. B. Waldo
1928--Dr. Carl Schott

The sixth annual banquet honoring the local teams will be held in the school gymnasium, Thursday evening, March 23, at six-thirty o'clock.

The Parent-Teacher Association is sponsoring the banquet which is an anticipated event in the community. Mr. Leroy Carr, president of the association is general chairman.

The reception committee will consist of Miss Cleora Skinner, principal, Mr. C. Fletcher, Mr. A. Snow, Mr. H. Schuring, Mr. H. Sweetland and Mr. G. Chipman, members of the school board; Mr. L. Carr, Mrs. F. Kingsbury, Mr. A. Meyer, Miss Lela McDowell, Mrs. J. Kramer and Mr. H. Wolbers.

Ticket sales have given every indication that the usual large crowd will be in attendance. The publicity committee are Mr. P. J. Dunn, Mr. Garland Lacey, Mr. H. Schuring, Miss Sigrid Englund and Miss Dorothea Lindeman while ticket sales are in charge of Mr. L. D. Crawford, Mr. A. Snow, Mr. Porter Matteson, Mr. Henry Oudemans, Mr. Herman Visker, Mr. John Gemrich, Mr. Thomas Schuring and Mr. Bernard Fletcher.

The gymnasium will be dressed up for the occasion by the decorating committee. Mr. C. H. Fletcher, Mr. Frank Meyer, Mr. J. Kramer, Mr. Koert Kuiper, Miss Lena Rezinger, Miss Ann Pearson, Miss Verna Fenslermacher, Mrs. R. Derksen, Mrs. F. Kingsbury, Mr. Ralph Fletcher, Mrs. Berit Nederboed and Mr. Harm Kuiper.

chosen his career in professional baseball. Originally signed by the Detroit Tigers, Leon Roberts, class of 1969, now plays with the Houston Astros and is followed enthusiastically on television by Portage citizens.

When Miss Skinner retired in 1939, Hugh Archer followed her as superintendent. That same year Lewis Crawford, principal for seventeen years, left to do graduate work at the University of Michigan. When Mr. Archer came, the teachers were still hired by Western State Normal College with one exception. The board of education hired a half-time band and orchestra teacher. The band had been started in 1925 and since there remained considerable enthusiasm among the students, the board felt it was best to hire an instructor. Times have not changed and music is an important part of the curriculum with many fine performances given by the bands, orchestras and choruses. Some graduates have made music a career. Although not a graduate of Portage, the internationally famous conductor, Thomas Schippers, attended Portage Agricultural School through the fifth grade.

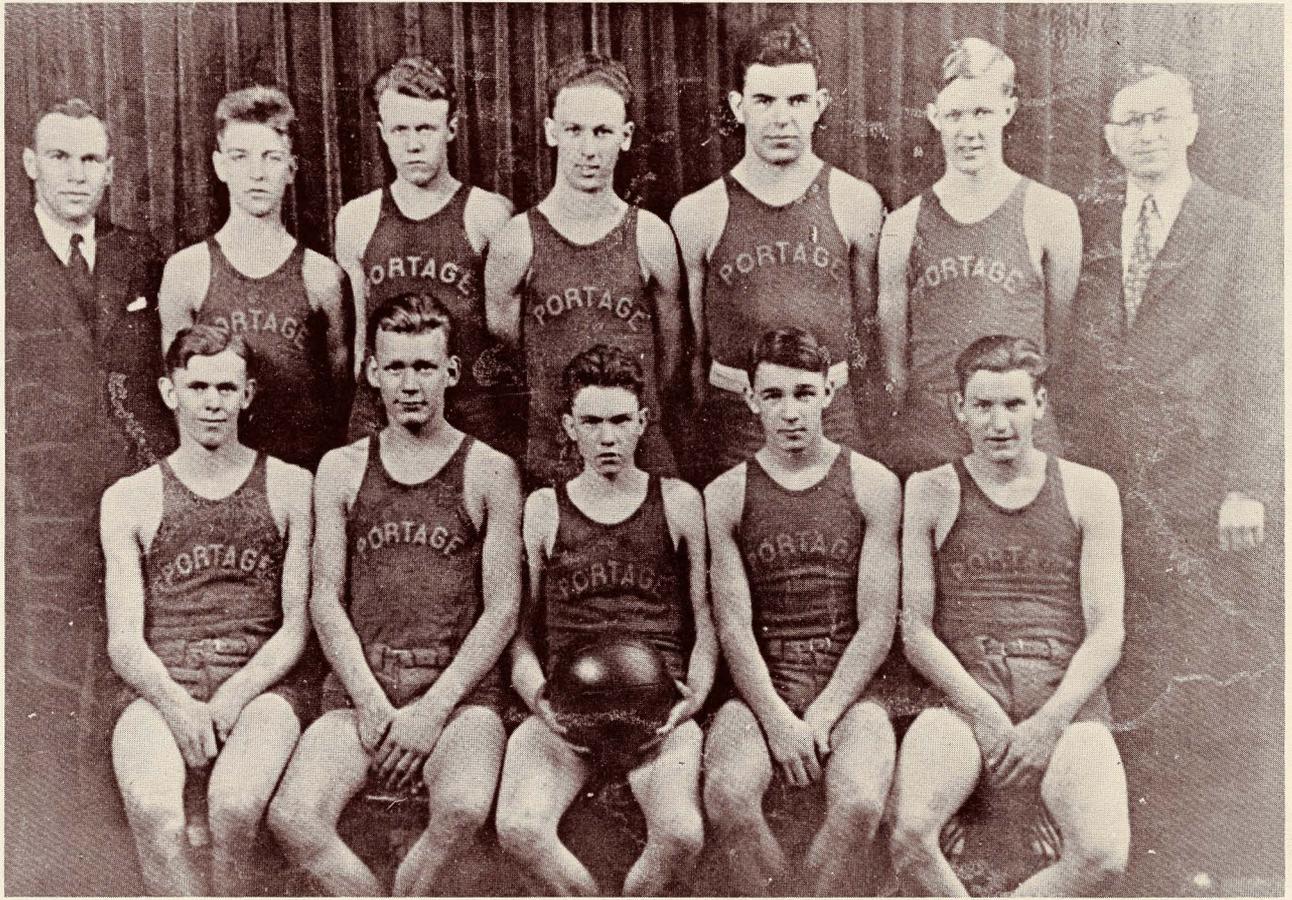
Soon the new superintendent faced the problem which had been historically the biggest one for Portage schools, i.e. overcrowding. The onset of World War II made building materials unobtainable. In 1943, while he and the board wrestled with these problems, Mr. Archer was called into service. Mr. Crawford, who had returned from the University of Michigan as principal, became acting superintendent. Because the school could not handle the increased enrollment, Portage decided to have school only through the tenth grade; the eleventh and twelfth grades were sent into Kalamazoo with a choice of Western's Campus School, Kalamazoo Central High School, or Kalamazoo Christian High School. When Mr. Archer returned from service and was hired as superintendent of the Paw Paw Training School, Mr. Crawford became superintendent of the Portage schools.

Throughout these years, there had been constant agitation among the remaining five district schools to be annexed to Portage Agricultural School. Although annexation had been turned down by Western at various times, Mr. Crawford realized something must be done. Enrollments were increasing all over the township and many of the parents in these schools wanted their children to attend Portage Agricultural School. One group of parents, in particular, raised strong objections when, because of overcrowding, their children were taught in classrooms converted from a vacant tavern at the corner of Portage Road and Centre Avenue. After several conferences with Paul Sangren, President of Western, and members of the Michigan Board of Education, a plan was devised whereby Western would contribute a

the lake would hold so many people.

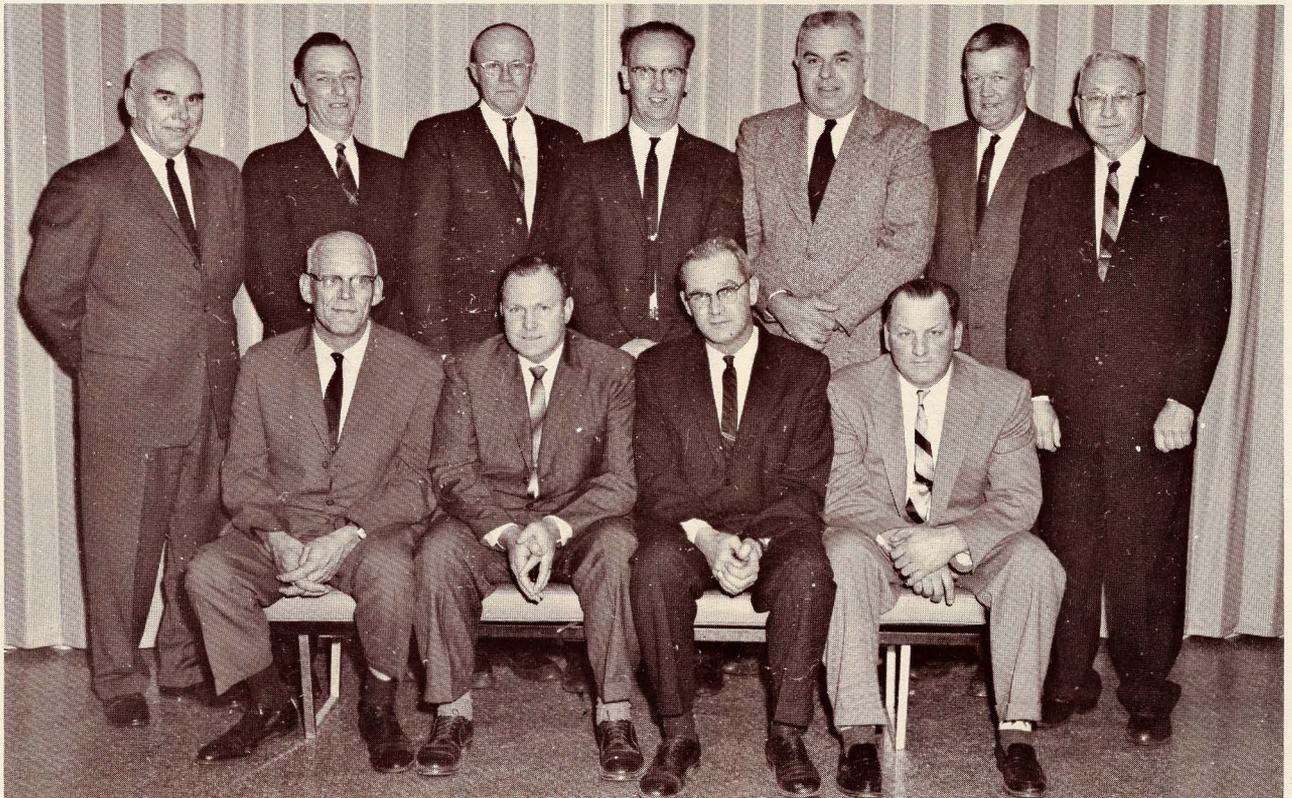
During the seventeen years that Miss Skinner was superintendent many changes took place. In addition to an ever increasing enrollment and additions to the building, several new courses were added to the high school program. Although few students, after completing the eighth grade, went on to higher grades, every effort was made to broaden the curriculum. In 1925, the year the P.T.A. was formed, Portage began competing in basketball with area high schools. Although the school did not have a regular physical education teacher, P. J. Dunn coached the boys in a number of sports. In 1931-32 Portage's baseball and track teams won the county titles. In 1932-33, the basketball team was outstanding, winning the county, district, regional and state championships.

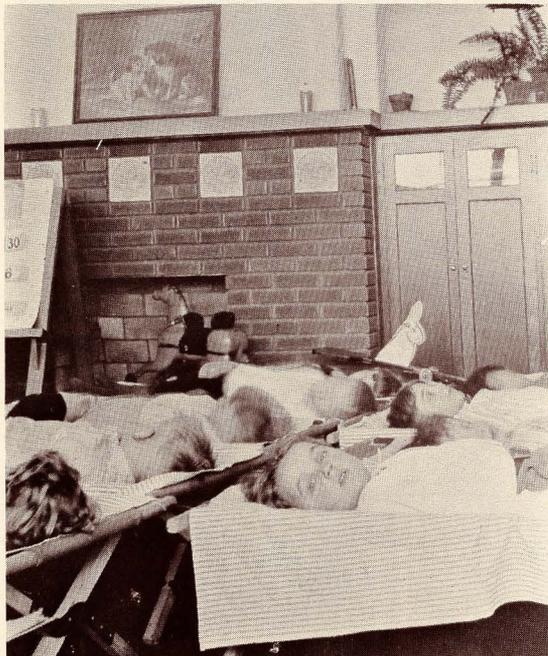
As the years passed, Portage remained interested in sports and the enthusiasm Mr. Dunn engendered so many years ago remains evident among the students. Games held during the year are well attended and the various teams claim many victories. Both high schools currently belong to the Southwestern Michigan Athletic Conference. Swimming and hockey are favorite new varsity programs, and girls' varsity teams have been established in several sports. One of Portage Northern High School's graduates has

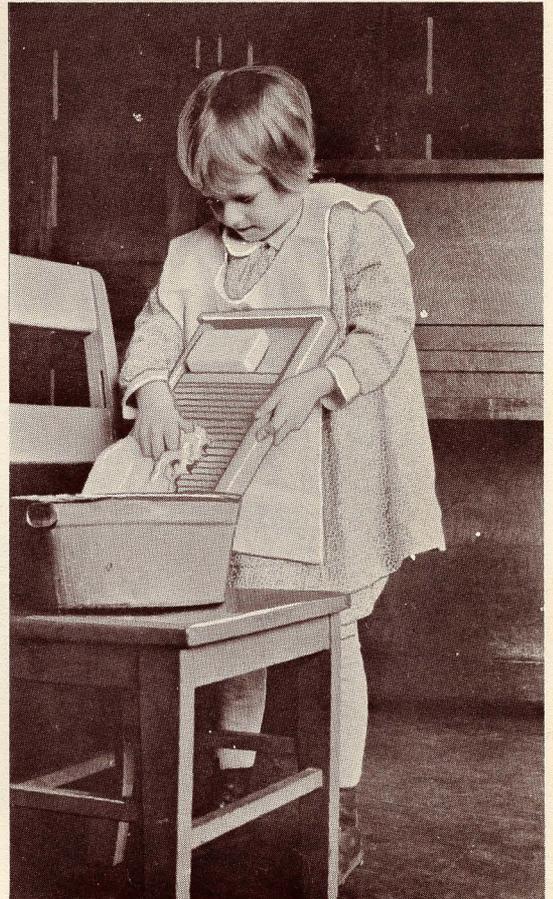
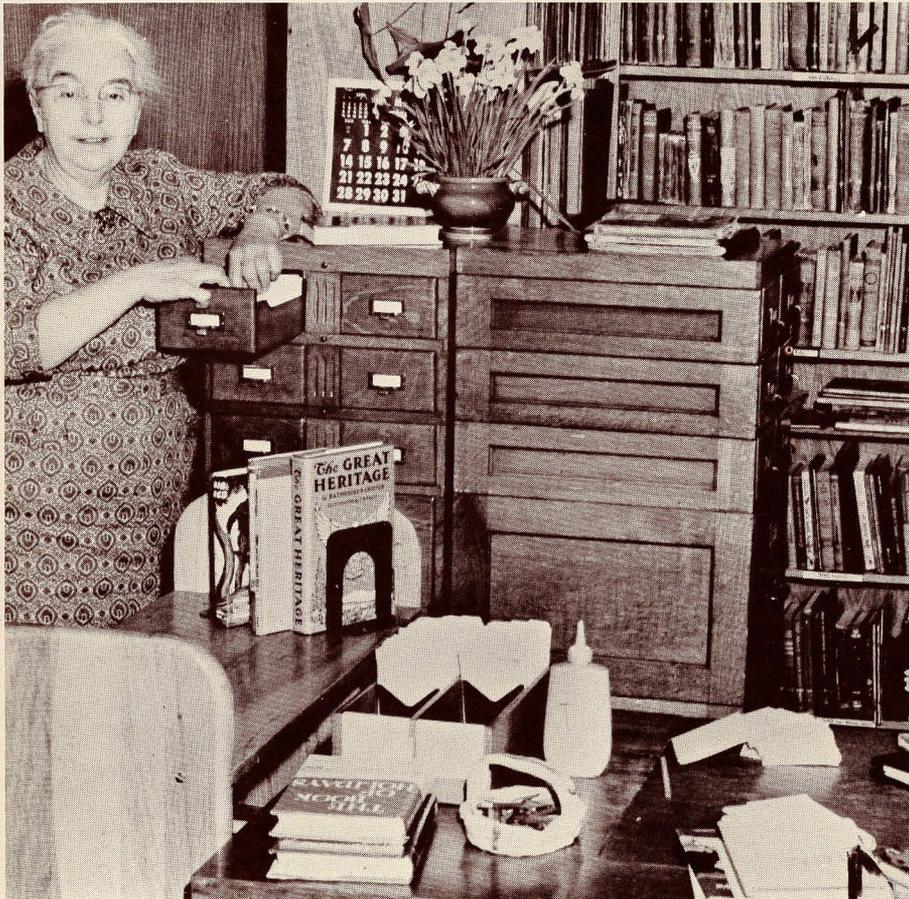
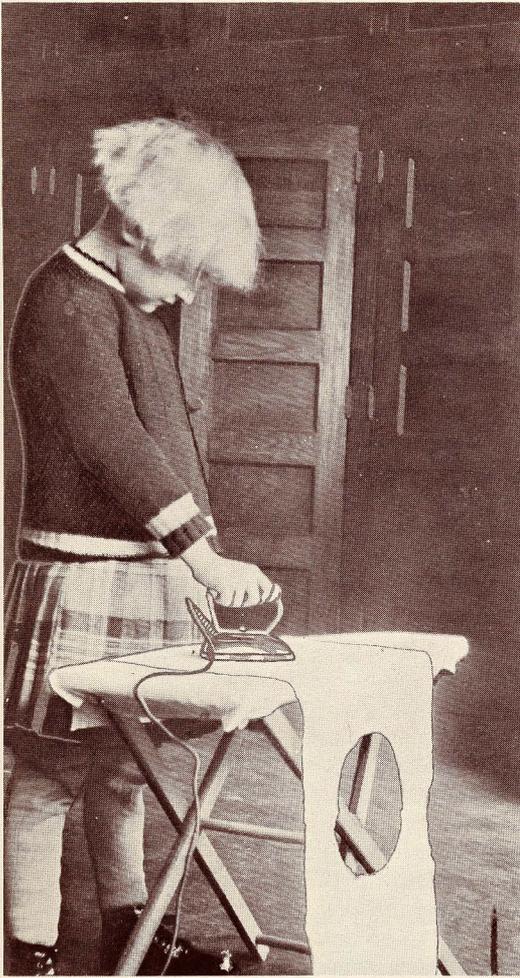


Class D State Champs - 1932. Back, from left: Coach Fran Pellegrum, John Kuiper, Ray Bates, Olin Kinney, Bill Burr, Tony Schuring and Principal P. J. Dunn. Front, from left: Wayne Holcomb, Claude Fletcher, Lowell Matteson, Bernie Meyer, and John Kramer.

Below: About thirty years later (Wayne Holcomb, absent).









Kindergarten Maypole - 1935.

Reminders of the Dutch heritage.



progressively smaller amount for salaries each of the next three years. At the same time Portage would receive primary fund and state aid monies and would hire its own teachers as well as furnish the twelve-room addition to the school building which was opened in 1947. So Portage Agricultural School became Portage Township Schools and all eight districts were included. Mr. Crawford had worked hard for consolidation and when he left in June of 1947 he was well satisfied with his achievement.

When Varl Wilkinson came to Portage as superintendent the summer of 1947, he found three overcrowded schools, Lake Center Elementary, Pershing Elementary and Central Elementary and High School. The enrollment increased 234% in the next decade from 1273 to 3587 students. During that period two additions were made at Lake Center and Central added ten more rooms and a large gym. Three new elementary schools were built, Milham, Waylee and a new Pershing.

In the next ten years, 1957-1967, one bond issue failed out of eleven and a total of \$18,000,000 was spent on new construction. The following is a chronological list of the new schools opened: Central Junior High, Ramona Lane Elementary, Amberly Elementary, North Junior High, Haverhill Elementary, Angling Road Elementary, Northern High School, and Lexington Green Elementary. During that time the school population increased by four to eight hundred students each year. Besides the increase in the township

schools, this growth reflected the annexation of portions of the city of Kalamazoo and Pavilion, Texas and Oshtemo townships.

In 1963 when Portage became a city, the Portage Township Schools became the Portage Public Schools. The district covered an area of nearly forty-five square miles, excluding the lake areas. By September, 1967, the enrollment reached 10,414 and 581 seniors graduated from the two high schools that year, quite a change from the six graduates of 1925. It is interesting to note that Albert Curry, great-grandson of Arad Cooley, who was a first settler in 1832 on Dry Prairie, happened to be one of the 1925 graduates and was president of his class. He became a county agricultural agent for some years but later returned to the home farm. His brother, Donald, graduated in the class of 1930 and pursued a career in agriculture which eventually led to his participation in the Point Four Technical Assistance Program, helping such countries as India, Liberia and Nigeria to achieve greater productivity through new methods of agriculture.

After 1967 only three schools were built, Woodland and new Central Elementaries and West Junior High School. By 1970 the population had become more stable and growth in school enrollment tapered off. The four superintendents during the period of rapid growth worked with dedicated and interested school boards. Much extra time was spent in choosing sites for new schools, going over bids, and deciding on new equipment. During that time the fleet of buses

Pershing School (District No. 6), built in 1927 to replace an older structure. After the present Pershing was constructed, this building was used for almost two decades as a clothing distribution center.





Cleora Skinner



Hubert Archer



Lewis D. Crawford

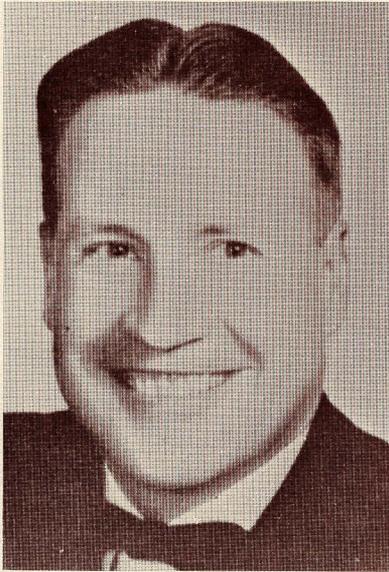
grew from ten in 1947 to over fifty at the present time. Today the transportation department has its own maintenance program, a bus drivers' training program and its own storage facilities.

Although an ever increasing building program continued through the years, the educational purpose of the schools was not forgotten. A competent administrative staff was hired to support the teaching staff as the need arose. Today administrative positions include directors in the

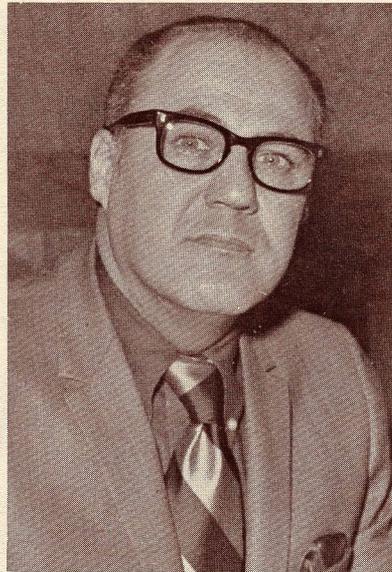
following areas of responsibility: elementary education, secondary education, audio-visual and library services, curriculum, special education, vocational education, and employee relations. In addition there are a business manager, an administrative assistant to the superintendent who is also responsible for the community school programs, and an assistant superintendent supervising transportation, food service and maintenance operation.



School picnic at Summer Home Park on Long Lake - 1925.



Varl Wilkinson



George Conti

Portage Schools have had five superintendents.

Changes in the curriculum were usually accomplished through staff working together with parents and students. The curriculum was constantly reviewed, updated, and improved; and innovative programs were evaluated in one or two schools before being adopted. There is, today, a wide variety of both academic and vocational offerings.

In addition to the music program which dates back to the nineteen twenties, the arts are well

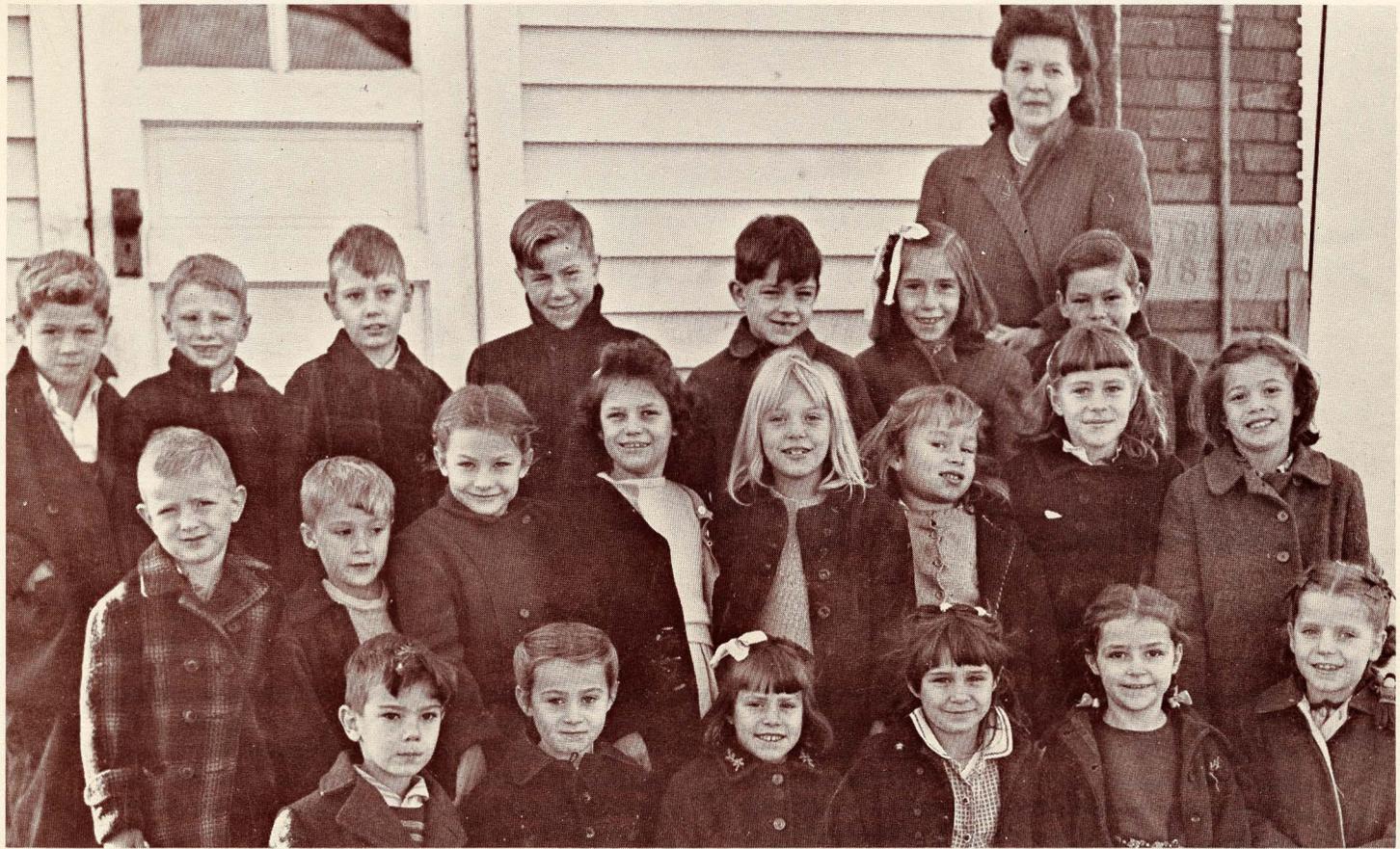
represented both within and outside the curriculum as well as a wide variety of other extra curricular activities. Art and drama events are scheduled regularly and debate and forensics are part of the curriculum in both high schools. There is a well developed and active distributive education department. To supplement all these activities the Audio-Visual and Library Services department provides centralized services for the procurement and processing of all library materials.

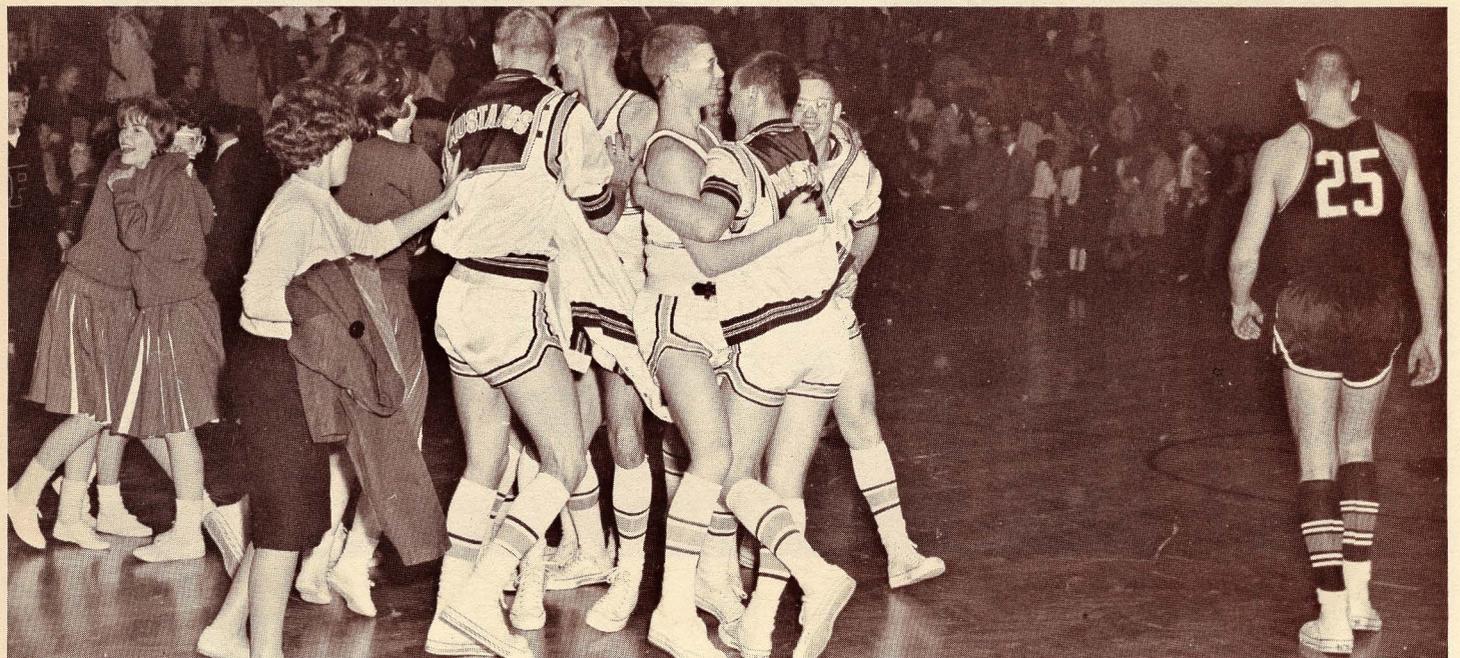
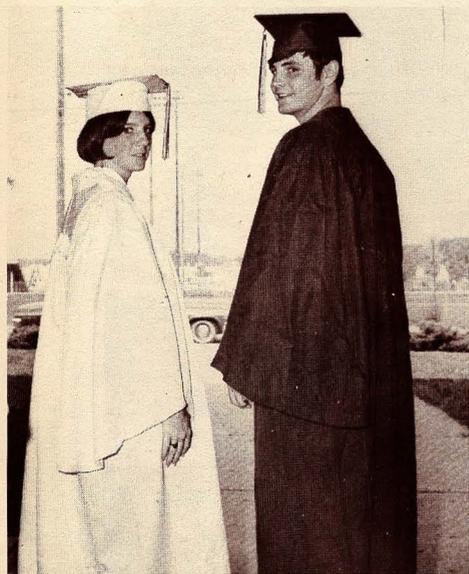
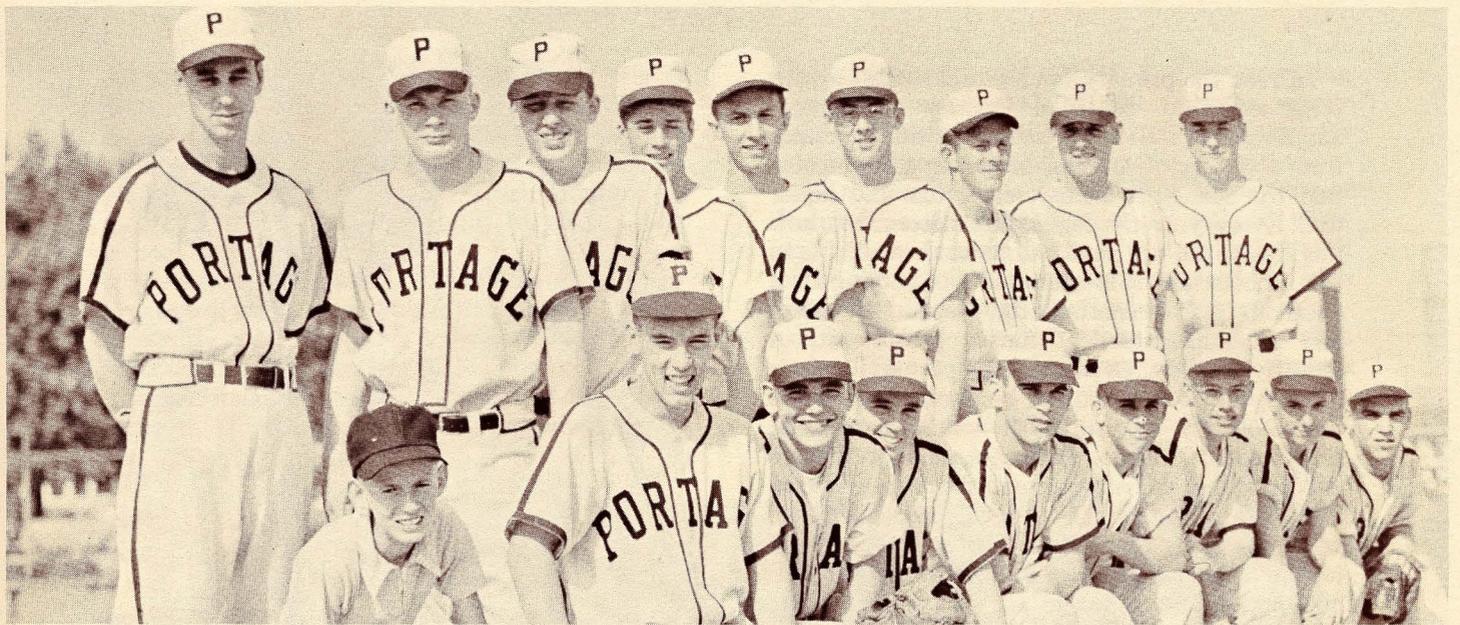


School picnic at Summer Home Park on Long Lake - 1925.



1925
Portage Agricultural School





In 1964 the primary fund was absorbed by the state aid fund. State aid money which now supplies about 37% of school revenues comes from a variety of sources, including state income tax, the Michigan lottery, sales tax and liquor tax. Every year the legislature determines how much state aid per pupil will be made available to the schools and it is often slow in coming to a decision. In the meantime, the board of education and the superintendent must operate with a tentative budget. Even after the per pupil rate is known, the budget can not be finalized until the fourth Friday in September when the official school count is made. The exact amount of state aid can at last be computed and that sum added to the operating income from local property taxes which presently furnishes 59% of school revenues (about half from residential and half from business and industrial taxes).

The influence of the state is felt locally by the school board and administration in one area other than state aid, i.e. school legislation. Ever since the Ordinance of 1785, existing laws have been amended or repealed and replaced by new ones. Some of these laws have benefited the schools; some seem to be the whim of a particular interest group. All of them take a measure of control away from the local board of education. Historically, curriculum control has always been the prerogative of city public schools; however twice a curriculum was written for country schools by the state superintendent. The first was a rather brief resumé of how to schedule classes and what to teach in each grade. It had an accompanying book entitled *How to Teach a Country School*. The



Where's Amberly? Superintendent Varl Wilkinson inspects the schools after the 1967 record-breaking snowfall.

Many of today's 10,000 students ride to school on one of the system's 70 busses.



1975 reunion of Portage High School 1924 and 1925 graduates. From left: Dorothea Huizinga, Bertha Dustin Hope (class of '24); Eleanor Matteson Burdick, Jennie Dykstra, Wilma Visscher Smith (class of '25).



second volume was published in 1900 and was so lengthy and complicated that it was probably ignored. Except for those two efforts, the wisdom of local curriculum control has been recognized by state officials, allowing the curriculum to be adapted to the different conditions within each school district.

George Conti assumed the duties of superintendent of the Portage Public Schools in 1970. He presently cooperates with a seven member board of education in educating 10,864 young people in eleven elementary, three junior high and two high schools. The current valuation of buildings, sites

and equipment is \$44,000,000 and the operating budget is nearly \$15,000,000. Almost eighty percent of this budget is allocated to salaries for nearly 600 teachers and about 200 other employees. Dr. Conti's job is vastly different from that of Rufus Rice, the first teacher almost 150 years ago; but the concern for the education and growth of the community's youth demonstrated by Caleb Sweetland and Elijah Root, when they established those first two log cabin schools, persists today. This concern has supported the growth and development of a school system in which Portage citizens justifiably take great pride.



1975-76 Board of Education. From left: Superintendent George Conti, Louis Boyer, Robert Goldacker, President Gayl Werme, Don Overlander, Vice President Richard Glass, Treasurer James Ellinger, Robert Lockwood, and Secretary Ted Vliet.





MILHAM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
FUTURE TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS

PORTAGE
ELEMENTARY
SCHOOL
PORTAGE TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS

LAKE CENTER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
PORTAGE TOWNSHIP SCHOOLS

AMBERLY ELEM SCHOOL
PORTAGE TWP SCHOOLS

RAMONA LANE
ELEMENTARY
PORTAGE TWP SCHOOLS

PESCHNO ELEMENTARY SCHOOL
PORTAGE TWP SCHOOLS



7

Churches and Other Organizations

When the first Indian Fields School in District No. 1 was completed in about 1833, Elder Winchell, who lived near Kilgore Road, held church services there every Sunday Morning. Later on, Sunday school classes were held in the building. Now and then Elder Winchell went to other townships to hold services and Elder Merrill from Kalamazoo township would take his place. It is not known how long church services were held in District No. 1 school but, according to old histories, school houses were often used for this purpose. The service was usually conducted by ruling elders of the Methodist church.

In the early years of Kalamazoo village there was a somewhat different situation. The first church services were also held in the schoolhouse but after a year or two a small white church was erected on South Street. Depending on the membership in a particular year its denomination changed between Presbyterian and Congregational. About a decade later the Congregationalists built a church on Academy Street, and the Presbyterians took over the little white church on South Street. According to biographies of the pioneers, several of the early settlers in Portage were members of these two Kalamazoo churches. Several were quite active in church work, and one of them was Sunday school superintendent for a number of years. It was quite a distance to travel by horse and buggy and an early start for church must have been made. It is recorded and old photographs verify that churches had horse sheds next to the church premises to stable the horses.

In all the records that are available about early Portage only four of its schools are mentioned as having been used for church services. In addition to District No. 1, discussed above, they included District No. 3 (Milham Avenue and Angling

Road), No. 4 (Oakland Drive south of Romence Road), and No. 5 (Centre and Westnedge Avenues). In 1876 William Harper began holding meetings in District No. 4 schoolhouse located on the Harvey Cooley farm on Oakland Drive. A short time later District No. 5 had Sunday school in the little brick school house on Centre Avenue. In 1876 the Reverend J. H. Wilcox from Oshtemo began holding church services on alternate Sundays in District No. 5. At the same time District No. 3 school was having services conducted on alternate Sundays by the Reverend Wilcox and the Reverend Bradner.

At the turn of the century the two groups in Districts No. 4 and No. 5 began to think about uniting and building a Methodist church. In 1902 it was decided to build the church in District No. 5 which was closer to the heart of the township. Several members from District No. 3 school and a few other citizens of Portage joined the group. The church building was started in August, 1902 and dedicated on November 30 of the same year by Reverend J. C. Floyd, District Superintendent of Kalamazoo District of the Methodist Episcopal Church. It was located on the southwest corner of Centre and Westnedge Avenues.

The members did much of the work in erecting the church. Mrs. Ruth Clementz and Mrs. Ethel Nichols recall how their father, Dan Curry, would hitch up his team of horses and drive to the church to help dig the cellar. Others laid the foundation and did the carpentry work. This first church in Portage began with a membership of fifty-one which one year later had increased to fifty-five. The congregation celebrated its first anniversary with an oyster supper which 150 people attended. The supper proved to be so popular that until 1942 there was an oyster supper

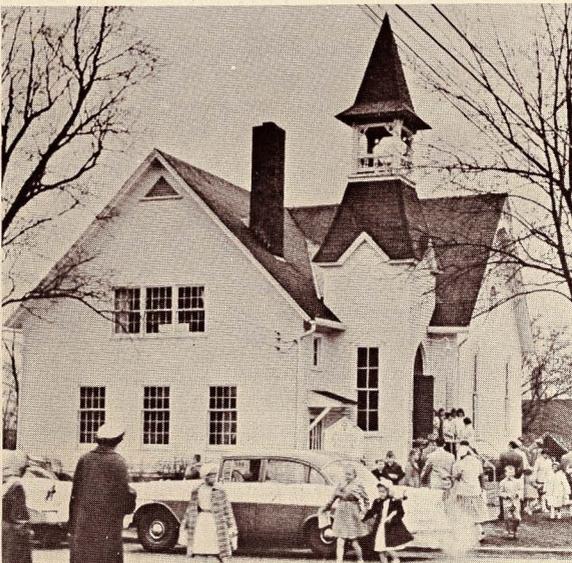
every year on Washington's birthday.

The Ladies Aid of the church began meeting at members' homes while the church was under construction, and by the time it was completed they had sewed together enough carpet rags to have a carpet woven for the church parlor. A Girls' Society and Woman's Foreign Missionary Society were later organized and in 1940 existing women's groups united to become the Woman's Society for Christian Service. That same year the



Portage United Methodist Church—The original building was erected in 1902 at Centre and Westnedge.

Methodist Church in the late '40's after remodeling.



youth group, known as the Epworth League, became the Methodist Youth Fellowship. Earl Osterhout, Harold Wolbers, Mr. and Mrs. P. J. Dunn and Paul Romence were very active in making this new fellowship successful.

At first the church used oil lamps but these were replaced by electric lights in 1924. Twenty horse sheds were built in 1910 on leased land west of the building at a cost of \$350.00. Later they were sold at auction to Albert Curry for \$50.00. Much of the repair work on the church as well as the landscaping and upkeep of the grounds was done without charge by the men of the church. The building was first heated with wood, then by an oil burner; a furnace was not installed until an addition was built in 1948. At that time the rest of the church was remodeled and completely redecorated. In 1952 the parsonage was built and for the first time the Methodists had a resident minister.

During the first three or four decades money was always in short supply. The men of the church raised money by their oyster suppers and instead of heating the church for board meetings they saved money by holding potluck suppers in their homes where they later conducted the meetings. Descendants of early Portage settlers were often among those hosting potlucks, including Daniel Curry, Harry Sweetland, J. T. Newell, Albert Snow, James Gilmore and Frank Bacon.

The church women were not far behind in their work for the church. On one occasion in 1915 Mrs. Maude Glenn wrote a charming little chronicle concerning a sale of baked goods and farm produce held in order to wipe out a deficit in the church budget. Many names of early Portage settlers appear including Bishop, Beckley, Chubb, Romence, Snow, Gilmore, Bacon, Sweetland, Campbell and Curry. There is no doubt that the congregation of that first Methodist church consisted mainly of farm families whose forefathers were early settlers in Portage. The budget for the year in which the sale was held was \$480.00, but the chronicle does not relate whether or not the deficit was wiped out. It does describe the severe drought experienced that year which caused most crops to fail. By 1919 the budget had increased to \$600.00. The mortgage on the church building was burned in 1949.

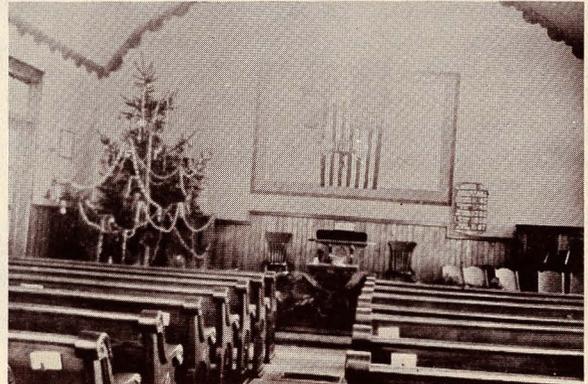
In the decades that followed Portage began to experience some of the growth that would change the township from an agricultural community into a city of homes and industries. In spite of two additions, the church was so crowded by 1958 that it was decided to move to a new site on Westnedge Avenue about a mile south of Centre Avenue. The new church was dedicated in 1966 and today the Portage United Methodist Church has a membership of about 800. It is interesting to note that there are a number of members living

in Kalamazoo. Aside from three Matteson families no descendants of the earlier pioneers seem to have continued their membership. Of the later Portage arrivals who were very active when the church began, Paul and Thelma Romence and one son remain on the membership rolls.

In about 1885 to 1890 the first few Dutch families moved into Portage with the intention of preparing marsh land for raising celery. They settled mostly along Schuring Road and on the east side of Westnedge Avenue. When their efforts were less than successful, some moved back to Kalamazoo. From about 1895 until the turn of the century, others moved in and settled in the vicinity of what is now Portage Plaza and along Centre Avenue. This group seems to have been quite successful and formed the nucleus of a much larger group that came in the early 1900's. A few of the families kept their connections with Kalamazoo's Reformed churches but the distances were a disadvantage. In the spring of 1902 Reverend H. Douwstra of the Third Reformed Church of Kalamazoo began coming to Portage every Wednesday evening to hold services in District No. 5 schoolhouse. They were well attended. In the fall the group meeting in the school requested the approval of the classis of Grand River to organize and be admitted as a

mission station. After that a student from Western Theological Seminary in Holland conducted both morning and evening services in the schoolhouse on Sundays. The Methodists met in the afternoon. By April of 1903 the group wished to organize as a congregation and in June this took place with an initial membership of 17.

In November, 1903, the first pastor arrived from Iowa and met his new congregation which



Interior and exterior of the Methodist Church. Pictured are Etta and Henry Wolbers.



had already decided to build a church of its own. A small white church was erected on the site of the present building on Westnedge Avenue near Centre, and a parsonage was built in 1905. The sanctuary was not completed until 1910 when the third pastor Reverend J. J. Menning arrived from Iowa. Before he left in 1915 there were forty-four families in the congregation with over one hundred members.

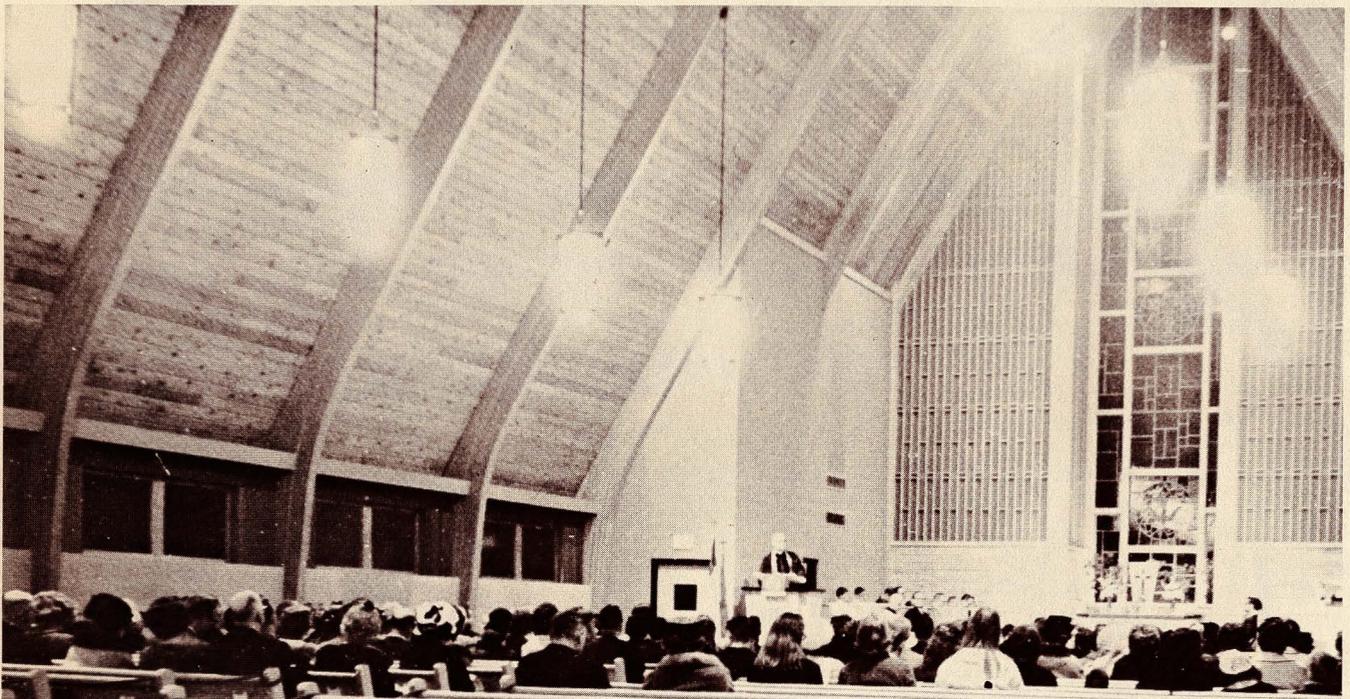
The following fifteen years saw a tremendous growth in the church. By its thirtieth anniversary in 1933, there were 98 families in the congregation with 203 communicant members and 245 non-communicants. There were 269 enrolled in the Sunday school. The budget for that year was \$3,028.81 for the church alone not including over \$800.00 in contributions to various denomination-wide causes. No longer a mission church, it had become self-supporting as well as contributing to the mission board of the church. The Reformed Church of America has a long history of both local and foreign mission work. Established in New York in 1628 by the Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam, it is the oldest Protestant denomination in America with a continuous ministry.

During the first thirty years of growth the church had been considerably enlarged, a new wing had been added and a much larger parsonage had been built. Oil lamps and stoves no longer lighted and heated the building and many modern conveniences had been installed. Throughout this period the societies of the church also grew and

their members almost invariably bore the names of early Dutch celery farmers. They were active in giving support to special church projects. The Ladies Aid held a sale each year as well as collecting from every member at its bi-weekly meetings. In 1933 the society collected ten cents per person from each of its 28 members. With this money it contributed to the upkeep of the parsonage and helped needy families in the church. The Missionary Society, with a membership of 18 in 1933, met once a month and its efforts were directed toward furthering the missionary projects of the denomination. The Men's Society met every Tuesday evening during the winter months. Its meetings were held strictly in the Dutch language, and its main purpose was to broaden members' understanding of the Bible. There were two youth groups. The Christian Endeavour met every Sunday evening and, although total membership was 40, attendance averaged 25. The girls outnumbered the boys by about four to one. The Church League for Service, composed of the young girls of the church, devoted its time to missionary causes and local welfare work.

The church was a close-knit group and through the years there was a great deal of inter-marriage among the young people. In 1966 the church had 185 families and a large church school was added to the new church which had been built in 1950. Since then the congregation has continued to grow and at present has well over 200 families.

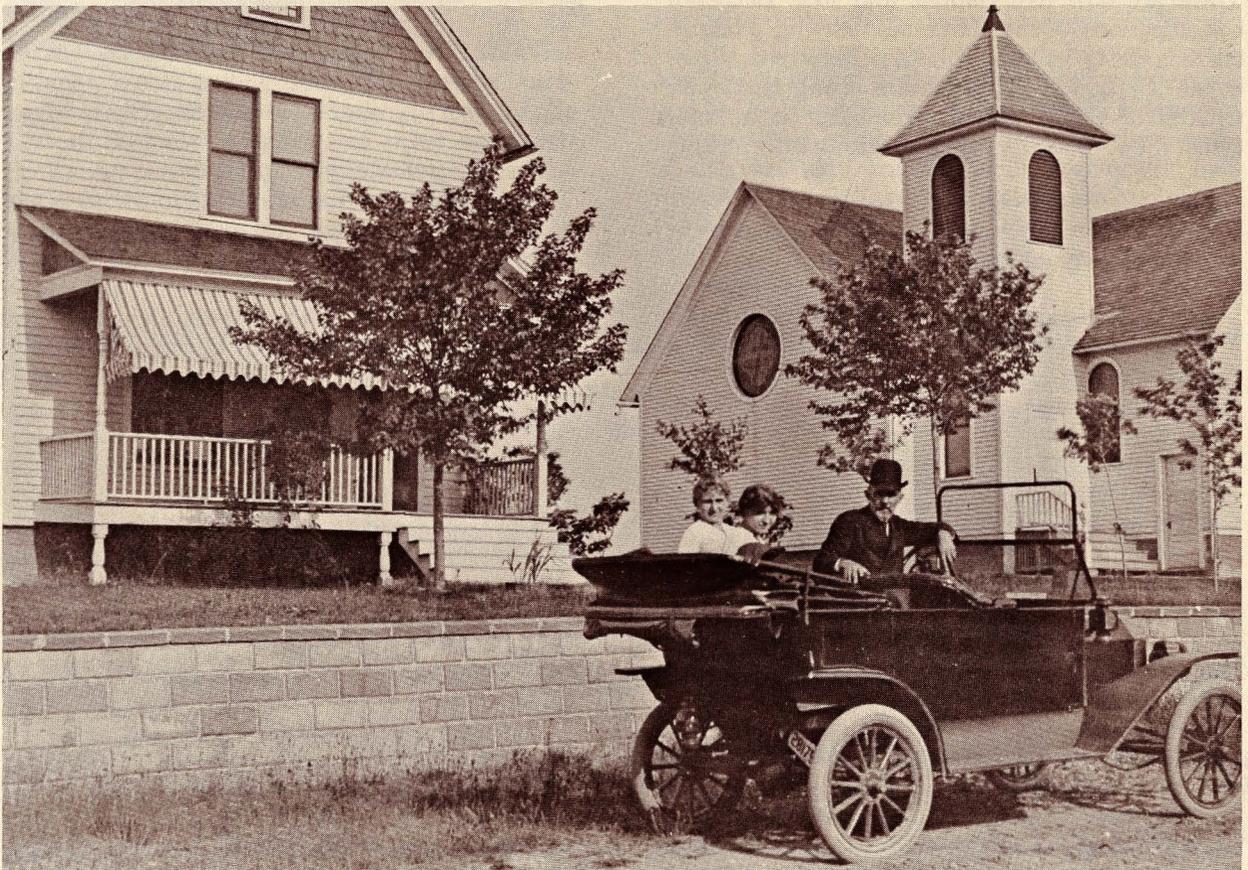
Interior of the present Methodist Church dedicated in 1966.





First Reformed Church of Portage and parsonage. The church was built in the early 1900's on Westnedge near Centre.

First Reformed Church and parsonage after remodeling.



Many of these families are the descendants of the early celery farmers. Two of the Schurings were charter members and today at least fourteen families belonging to the church can claim some relationship to them. Mrs. Anna Posthumus, formerly Anna Schuring, is perhaps the oldest member of the Schuring family and a lifelong member of the church. The Kuiper family is a close second in number of Reformed Church members followed by the Hoeksema, Dykstra and Elzinga families, all descendants of early celery farmers. Some of these families are still using the muckland to grow vegetable and flower plants but a great many are engaged in other enterprises.

While the two pioneer churches were increasing rapidly in membership, a similar population growth was experienced throughout the township. Many of the newcomers continued their memberships in Kalamazoo churches, but some joined the two established Portage churches and others wanted churches of their own faith. Many Kalamazoo churches began small mission groups which grew rapidly into self-supporting congregations. Most of the young Portage churches met in school buildings until they could afford to build their places of worship.

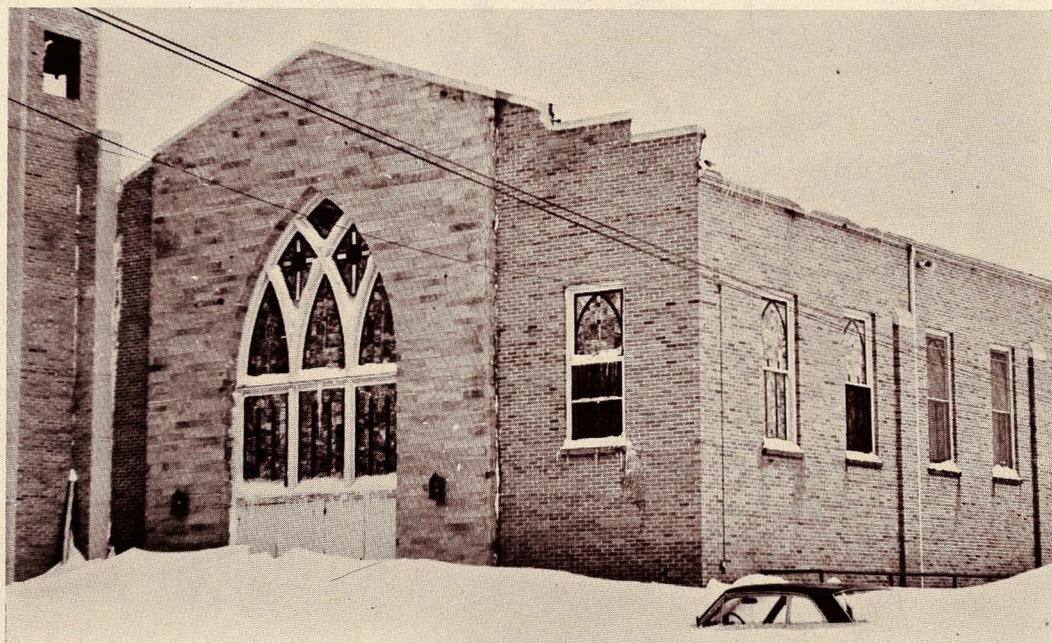
Although the Methodist and the Reformed churches are the most significant to early Portage history, many others have joined them in recent years in contributing vitally to community life. There are now five Baptist and four Lutheran congregations. Other churches serving Portage citizens today include Christian Reformed, Episcopal, Catholic, Presbyterian, Congregational, Church of Christ and several other denominations. (See Appendix for complete list of Portage

churches.) The two lone white churches which stood very near each other at the turn of the century have now increased to more than thirty in number. Those early churches were the spiritual and social life of a growing community and the members did much to mold the standards of its citizens.

Located very near the original Methodist Church on Centre Avenue were two other buildings that were influential in the development of Portage. One was the Grange Hall, where the farmers of the community met for a number of years. The grange suppers were famous and the farmers' wives did the baking and cooking. There were no packaged mixes in those days, and the women vied with one another to see who could



Masonic Hall built in 1930 to replace an older wooden structure.



Record snow storm of 1967 even closed Portage churches. Note buried car in front of First Reformed Church.



Optomists honor retired local educators.

turn out the most mouth watering cakes and pies. Perhaps homemade bread or biscuits and home churned butter adorned each table. The Grange Hall and the society which it housed have long since disappeared but Grange chapters are still active in many agricultural communities.

The second historic building on Centre Avenue is the Masonic Hall, which was built in 1930 to replace an earlier building. According to the lodge secretary of fifty years, William Bonte, the older wooden building had been used at various times in its history not only by the Masons but by the township board, the Grange society and as the township's only polling place. The present building is used by the Masons and the Order of the Eastern Star for meetings and other activities. For a short period of time this building housed the kindergarten of the Portage Agricultural School, which was over-crowded. Instituted in 1876, the Portage Masonic Lodge will celebrate its centennial year at the same time the United States is celebrating its Bicentennial. Most citizens who lived in the central and southeastern sections of Portage were lodge members in bygone years, and today the membership numbers about 235.

Another long-lived association in Portage was established as part of a state-wide organization for women sponsored by Michigan State University. Called the Home Extension Club, various township groups were affiliated with the County Home Extension Department which in turn was associated with similar agencies in other counties. Originally composed chiefly of farmers' wives, the club met in members' homes; and the extension service provided speakers and new ideas in homemaking. Now and then, all the township groups met together for lunch in the Kalamazoo County Recreation Building. These luncheons were looked forward to by the members and a different group took charge of each meal. The

Portage group still meets regularly and continues to be affiliated with the county and state organizations. Two charter members, Mrs. Leona Pound and Mrs. Bird Corbus, remain active; and the former Margaret Linsell, for many years the county extension agent, is a member.

Two of the larger women's groups in the city are the Portage Newcomers' Club and the Portage Women's Club. Both are actively concerned with the welfare of the city and are interested in the advancement of cultural and social programs. Portage women also participate in the activities of various Kalamazoo organizations. Several Portage women belong to the Ladies Library Association in Kalamazoo, one of the oldest federated women's clubs in the United States and the owner of the first club building built specifically for women in this country. The Kalamazoo branch of the American Association of University Women also includes a number of Portage members, including Mayor Betty Ongley.

Service groups for businessmen have been part of Portage for some years. Optomists, Lions, Rotarians, Kiwanians and AMBUCS have active organizations in the city. All of these groups work hard for the advancement of the community and some concentrate on special projects benefiting youth. The Veterans of Foreign Wars has been active in Portage for a number of years, as well as the Jaycees and the Percolator Club, a Chamber of Commerce organization. As with the women citizens of Portage, the men are also active in numerous Kalamazoo organizations.

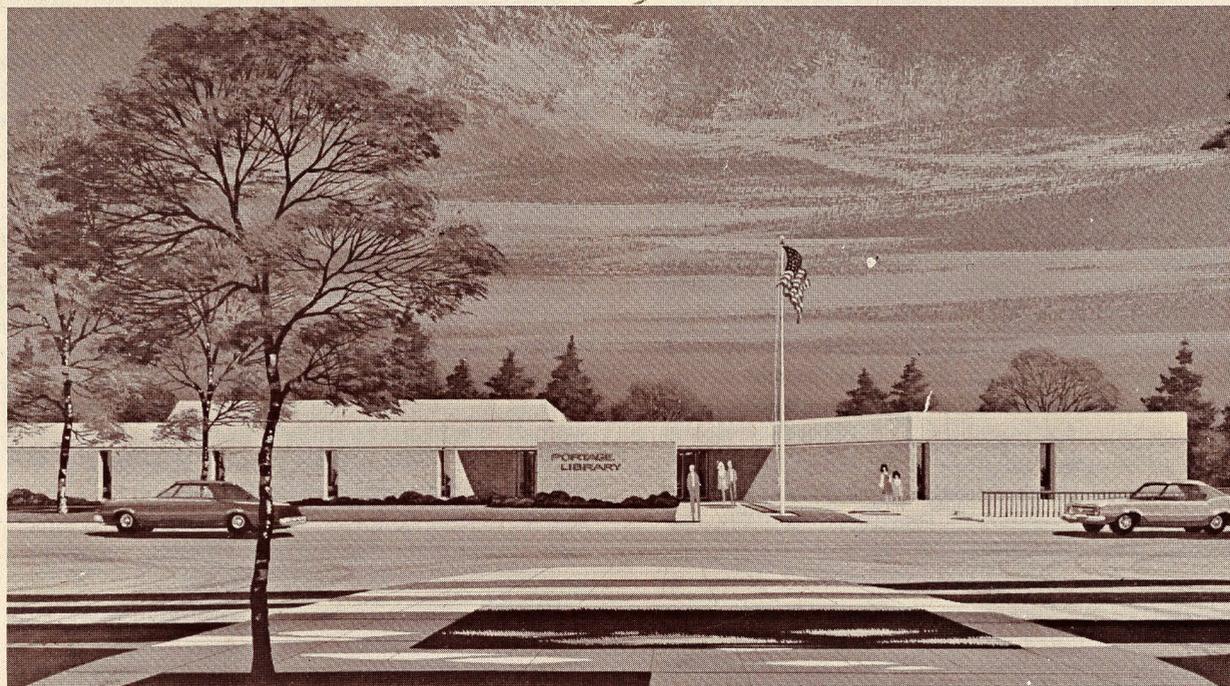
Perhaps the designation of the most persistent citizens' group best belongs to the Friends of the Library. Not especially old in years, this group organized with one purpose in mind. From the very beginning, its cause was to establish a public library for Portage. In about 1960 members began collecting books and storing them in an empty

house on Westnedge Avenue. In the meantime they located an empty building on Milham Avenue which was repaired and readied by volunteers using money donated by various groups and individuals for materials and equipment. The books collected by the group along with some borrowed from the state library were moved in, and the Portage Public Library opened its doors on April 1, 1962. For the first two years it was a private subscription library with patrons purchasing membership for a small fee.

When the Milham Avenue building became crowded, the library was moved in 1963 to its present location in Portage Plaza. It soon became apparent that the fast growing library would

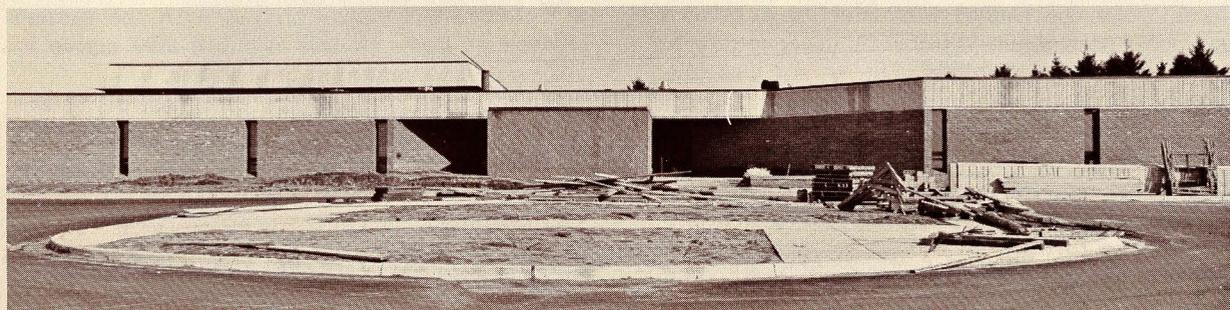
outgrow its second location. The persistence of the founders of Friends of the Library was successful again, and the Portage City Council was finally persuaded to seek voter approval to construct a new library building. Defeated once, the millage issue passed the second time, and a dedication ceremony for the new library is planned for the spring of 1976 as part of Portage's celebration of the United States Bicentennial.

Frank Hemphill, who assumed the duties of librarian in 1966, expects to have a small room in the new building set aside to house historical documents and pictures of Portage. With staff member Olive Halstead coordinating local efforts, the library is participating with a regional group



Architect's sketch of new library scheduled to open in 1976.

Portage's new library under construction.



of libraries in an oral history project in which interviews with the older citizens of Portage are being tape recorded. These records will be preserved as a source of information and human interest stories for future students of history.

In addition to the many service organizations in

Portage, there are other groups which formed as a result of common social or recreational interests. In a variety of ways, Portage has the atmosphere of a young, growing city with no lack of interaction between its citizens.



Above and right, Portage Public Library in Portage Plaza.

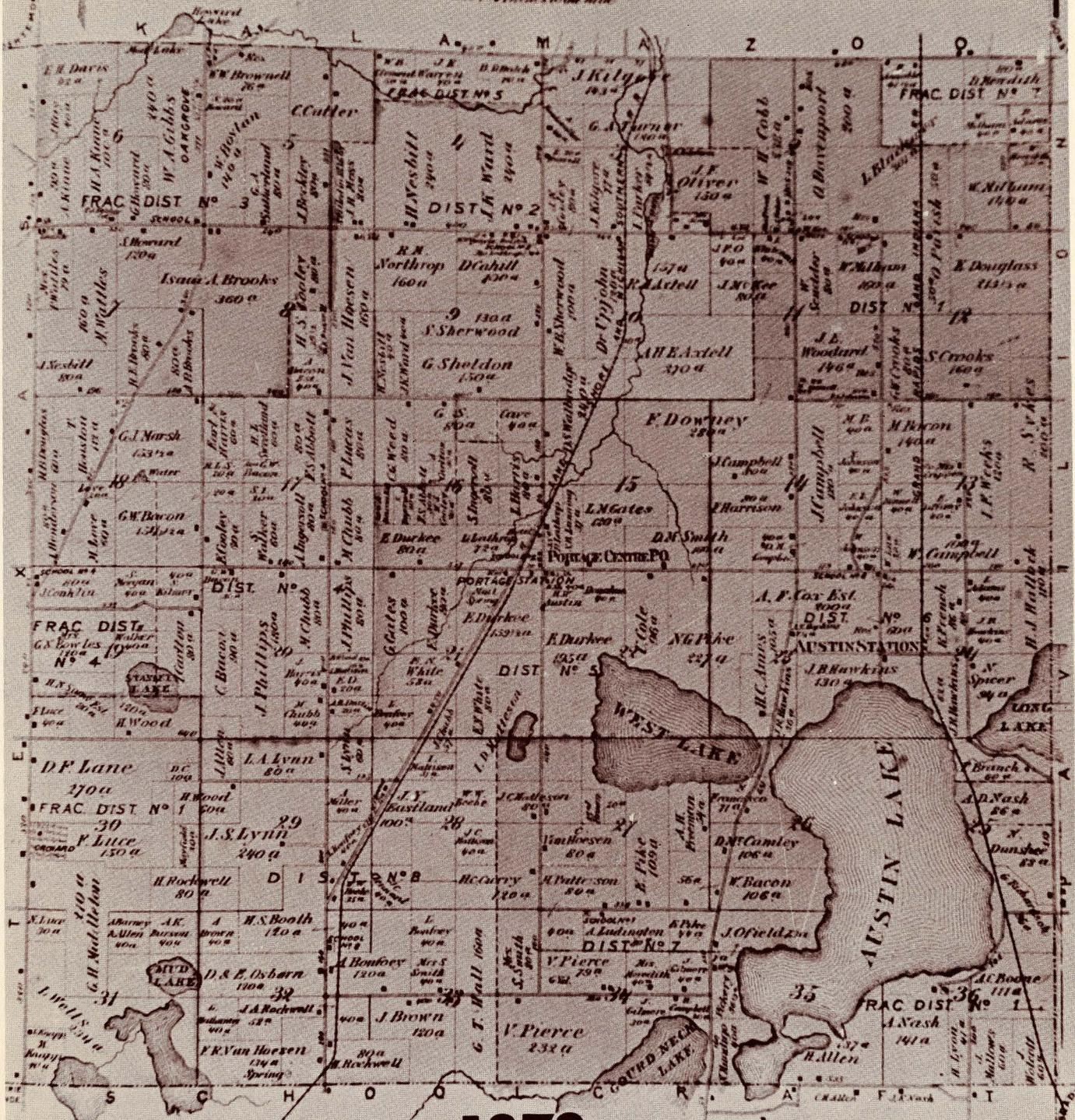


Friends of the Library, Jim Wilson (at left) and Hugh Harper, on moving day from the first library on Milham Avenue near Kirkshire to its next location in Portage Plaza.



Township III South **PORTAGE** Range XI West

Scale 1/4 inches to the mile



1873