

Sprawl Gets Personal

Background material for teachers

We Americans are beginning to realize the close connection between places important to our lives: where we live, work, grow crops, maintain natural areas and go for recreation. The information and projects contained in this unit connect Ohio's proficiency goals with an important sprawl issue: the impact of disorganized, unplanned development on land use. The background information, suggested projects and other materials in this study unit make it possible for teachers to incorporate this important topic into their lesson plans.

The Narrative can be used as the basis for a one-day study unit. The Outline offers a one-week alternative. This topic lends itself to extra-credit projects especially well.

People in the United States have headed West since the founding of Jamestown in 1607. In 1869 the first transcontinental railroad was completed, providing continuous railroad transportation across the entire United States. To the amazement and delight of all citizens, trains had brought our vast country together. Raw materials as well as people could travel easily and quickly across the entire country. No more wagon trains; no more remote territories!

Traveling from one place to another continued to become easier. Even before Henry Ford's first car in 1896, Richmond, Virginia, had electric trolley cars (1888). Virtually every large North American city and many small ones had electric trolley cars until the 1930s. In Los Angeles, the "Big Red Cars" of the Pacific Electric Railway operated on over one thousand miles of track. Pacific Electric, not the automobile, created the foundation for that sprawling metropolitan region.

Cleveland was at the center of a turn-of-the-century wealth expansion. In 1900, Euclid Avenue, known as Millionaires' Row, was lined with mansions built by all the new money.

- John D. Rockefeller made his money in oil, founding the Standard Oil Company and building a family compound in what is today known as Forest Hill Park.

- The Seiberling family of Akron made their money in rubber and built the famous Stan Hywet Hall that is now open to the public.
- Samuel Gwinn Mather founded Republic Steel. The Mather mansion is one of the few Euclid mansions that escaped the wrecking ball and is now a part of Cleveland State University.

The Metroparks' Emerald Necklace and most of the grand old public institutions in University Circle came into being because of the philanthropy that grew out of the great wealth accumulated by a few people in the early 1900s.

- Jephtha H. Wade, founder of the Western Union Telegraph Company, gave 75 acres of land for parks and an art gallery in 1882. The Cleveland Museum of Art was built in 1916 on this donated land.
- In 1892 Amasa Stone, the railroad tycoon, donated \$500,000 and 43 acres of land that allowed Western Reserve University to move from rural Hudson to what is now University Circle.
- The Cleveland Orchestra gave its first performance in 1918. Ten years later John and Elisabeth Severance donated the money from their Standard Oil wealth to build the orchestra's permanent home, Severance Hall.

By 1900 the wealthy residents on Millionaires' Row were becoming unhappy as the noisy, dirty city of Cleveland expanded in their direction. Because of this and the helping hands of developers such as the Van Swearingen brothers, the first wave of urban sprawl was soon underway. Garden suburbs were springing up throughout the country from 1910-1930. "Whereas most people today equate suburban development with negligent planning and incompetent design, the earliest garden suburbs were distinguished precisely by the sophistication of their layouts and quality of their architecture" (*City Life*, p. 190). The Van Swearingen brothers had streetcar lines built connecting the new commuter suburb of Shaker Heights with nearby Cleveland and built many of the beautiful, historic homes we still enjoy in the Heights. During the same time period Lakewood ran a streetcar down the middle of Clifton Boulevard.

The dirtiness of cities became an increasing problem as the industrial economy expanded. No one talked about a clean living environment. Making money wasn't hampered by environmental concerns and the steel mill and factory workers lived near their places of employment in cramped quarters, breathing the dirty air.

*League of Women Voters, Cuyahoga County, 2004; updated in October, 2007
High school study unit, "Sprawl Gets Personal"*

In the 1930s city leaders around the country were beginning to discuss the rundown, unhealthy conditions of cities. Comprehensive plans for change were made, but city improvement issues were shelved when the United States entered World War II in December, 1941. All our attention and energy went into the war effort. After the war in 1945, Americans were understandably interested in getting beyond the restrictions imposed on them during the war years. GIs back from the war were getting married, starting families, seeking educations, landing jobs, and moving to new homes in the quickly sprouting suburbs. Acres of farmland became acres of suburbs. The United States government through the GI bill and FHA (Federal Housing Authority) loans helped finance the flight out of the old dirty cities to new homes in relatively undeveloped rural towns and farms. Improving city living was all but forgotten.

Another project that was put on hold during the war years was road-building; but when President Eisenhower took office in 1953, he was ready to make highway creation a priority because he knew their value first-hand. In 1919 he and a friend joined the U.S. Army's first transcontinental motor convoy from Washington, D.C. to San Francisco. It took 62 days, and they suffered endless mechanical breakdowns, vehicles got stuck in the mud and equipment crashed through rickety wooden bridges. Later as a General with the Allied forces in Germany, he noticed the advantages Germany enjoyed because of quick troop movement along the autobahn network. The time was ripe for the Federal-Aid Highway Act which passed in 1956.

We have been on a road-building spree ever since. Together, the new network of high-speed, limited-access highways and the poor living and working conditions in cities fueled a massive flight of people to outlying areas. An unintended consequence is that we are not only left with dying cities, but we are losing farmland and forests as increasing numbers of subdivisions and malls are built in these formerly rural areas. Instead of restoring the old buildings, roads, sewers, and public places, we are building new. In behaving this way, we waste our resources and create instability.

What is getting us into trouble is the growing lack of balance between our urban and rural areas as we muddle through another revolution--a technological one. During the industrial revolution people viewed natural resources as unending. Today we are becoming much more aware of their limits.