

In 2002, The Wednesday Journal did a wonderful commemorative section honoring its centennial. It was entitled "Oak Park Stories 100 Years of Big News in a Small Town." Excerpts of articles from that edition are presented here, with permission from The Wednesday Journal.



The VMA's first VM

The 1953 board's first job in a Village Manager form of government, of course, was hiring a village manager, and Christiansen tapped Mark Keane, who had previous administrative experience in Milwaukee.

Keane stayed in Oak Park for nine years, departing in 1962 for the post of City Manager in Tucson, Ariz. He also served as a deputy secretary/assistant for HUD in the mid-'60s, and eventually became head of the International City Management Association until his retirement in 1983. Today he lives in Sedona, Ariz.

Keane, now in his 80s, had no direct contact with the previous regime, but when he started his job, he got a taste of what "business as usual" was like. Oak Leaves publisher Telfer MacArthur sent over a wad of parking and traffic tickets incurred by his staff on the assumption that Keane would "take care of them." MacArthur also sent along a helpful list of village hall staff that he felt should be retained or fired. Keane sent back a polite note—along with the tickets—informing him that things wouldn't be done that way anymore.

Of the people he worked with in the early days, Keane was particularly keen on Dwight Follett, whom he described as "one of the greatest civic leaders I've ever encountered. He was a selfless guy but with political savvy and he was dedicated to Oak Park. He was great at working with people."

Russ Christiansen, Keane recalls, was an attorney who was "very intelligent and had very good judgment. He was easy to work with and was a man of the highest integrity, personal and professional." Christiansen ran for re-election in 1957 because, Giddings says, "he wanted to win under his own name." And he stayed on the board for a third term in 1961, deferring the presidency to Homer Brown as president.

In general, Keane says, the early VMA were "really outstanding people. I've never had a better group to work with."

Keane's first task, of course, was to "straighten out the financial management" after years of questionable machine practices. He hired Harris Stevens, with whom he had worked in Milwaukee, as director of finance and administration and "turned him loose."

Village attorney Art Thorpe was another of Keane's best appointments. They made a great team, he noted. "Art and Harris Stevens were the key to our success," Keane says. Stevens succeeded Keane as village manager, further distinguishing himself during the turbulent fair housing era of the 1960s.

Along with a couple of quality boards, Keane says, "we changed the tone of government." The attitude of the public turned from suspicion to "the highest respect," he says. And as respect increased, so did citizen involvement.

Keane also set about making improvements in a rather dilapidated village hall (then located at Euclid Avenue and Lake Street), which helped improve overall staff morale.

Oddly enough, the thing he's proudest of is caring for the tree population, largely elms at that time. Not only had they been neglected for years, but Dutch elm disease was just beginning to make major inroads. Keane instituted the vehicle sticker fee and used it to fund a forestry department. He hired an expert from Michigan State University, who began the first professional tree care program in the village. "Saving the trees for Oak Park was the greatest thing we did," says Keane, emphatically.

Keane says he was sorry to leave Oak Park. "It was a great experience for me," he recalls. "I was tempted to stay there the rest of my life."

In terms of its citizen involvement in municipal government, he says, "it's a model democratic process."



Dwight Follett