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# MERIDIAN TOWNSHIP



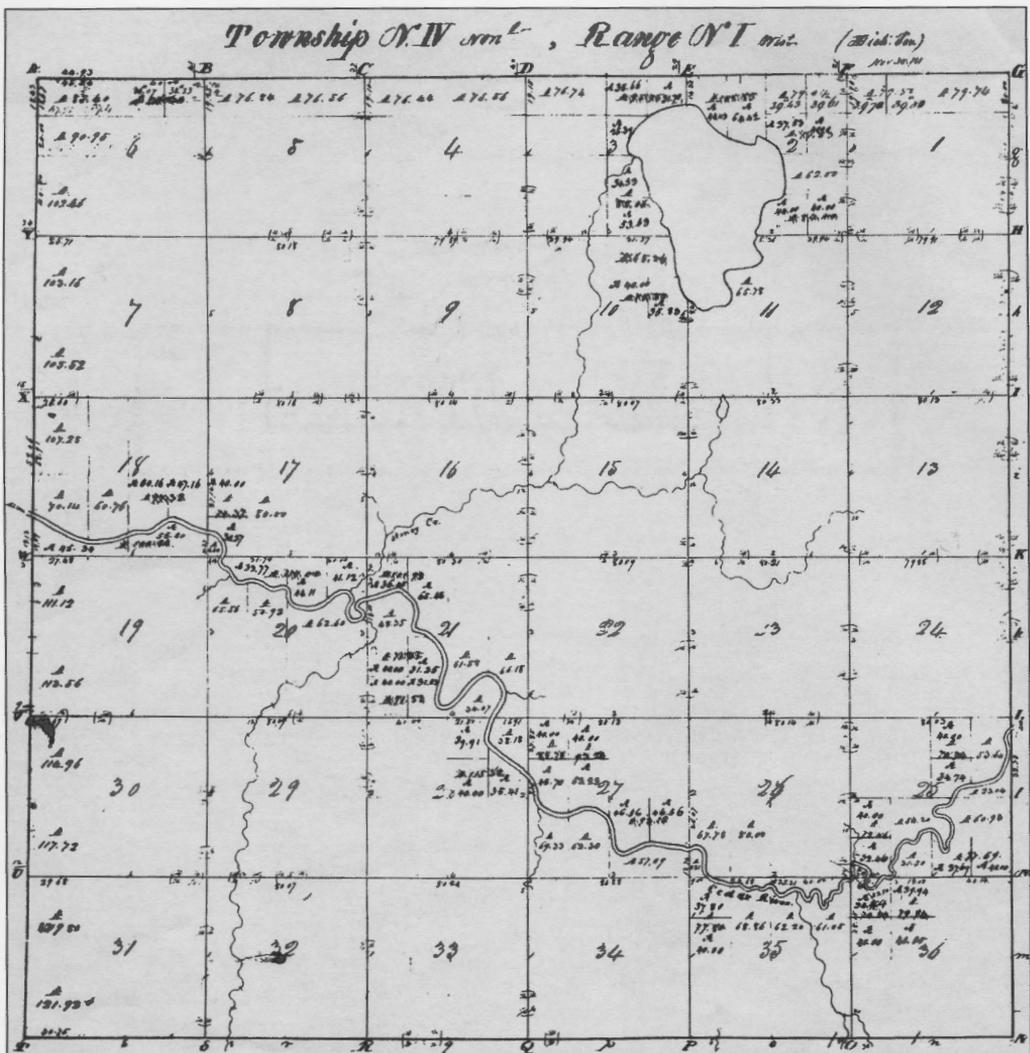
Jane M. Rose



Mr. William J. Breckenfeld  
2191 Hamilton Rd  
Okemos, MI 48864

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MERIDIAN TOWNSHIP



This section map shows Meridian Township as surveyed in 1827 by Musgrove Evans. (Courtesy of the Friends of Historic Meridian.)

**ON THE COVER:** This photograph was originally donated by the Elliotts, a pioneer family and longtime members of the Haslett community. It was taken in 1911 of the fledgling Haslett Woman's Literary Club, which still exists today as the Haslett Woman's Club. (Courtesy of the Friends of Historic Meridian Archives.) (see p. 34)

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*of America*

# MERIDIAN TOWNSHIP

Jane M. Rose



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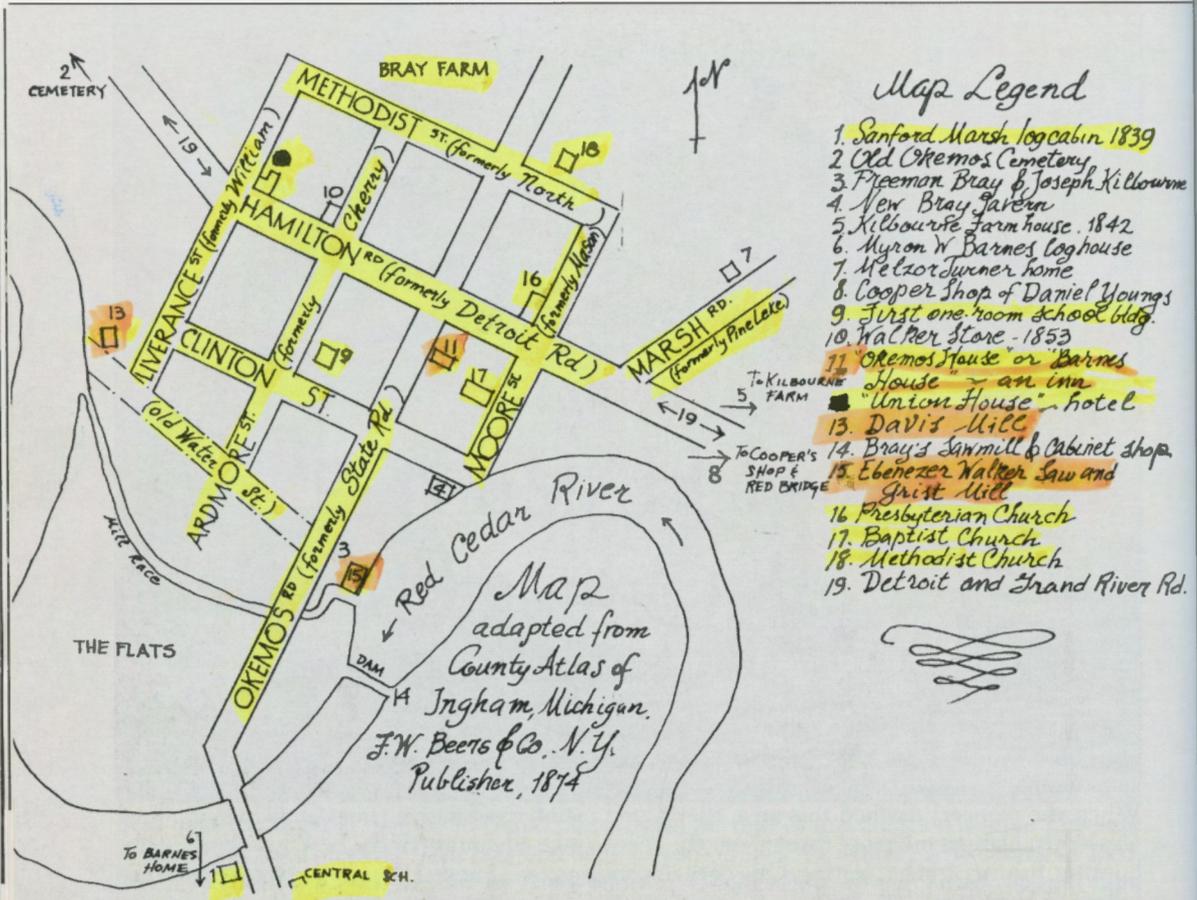
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*To my children, Robin and Laurence, for your  
love, support, and encouragement*



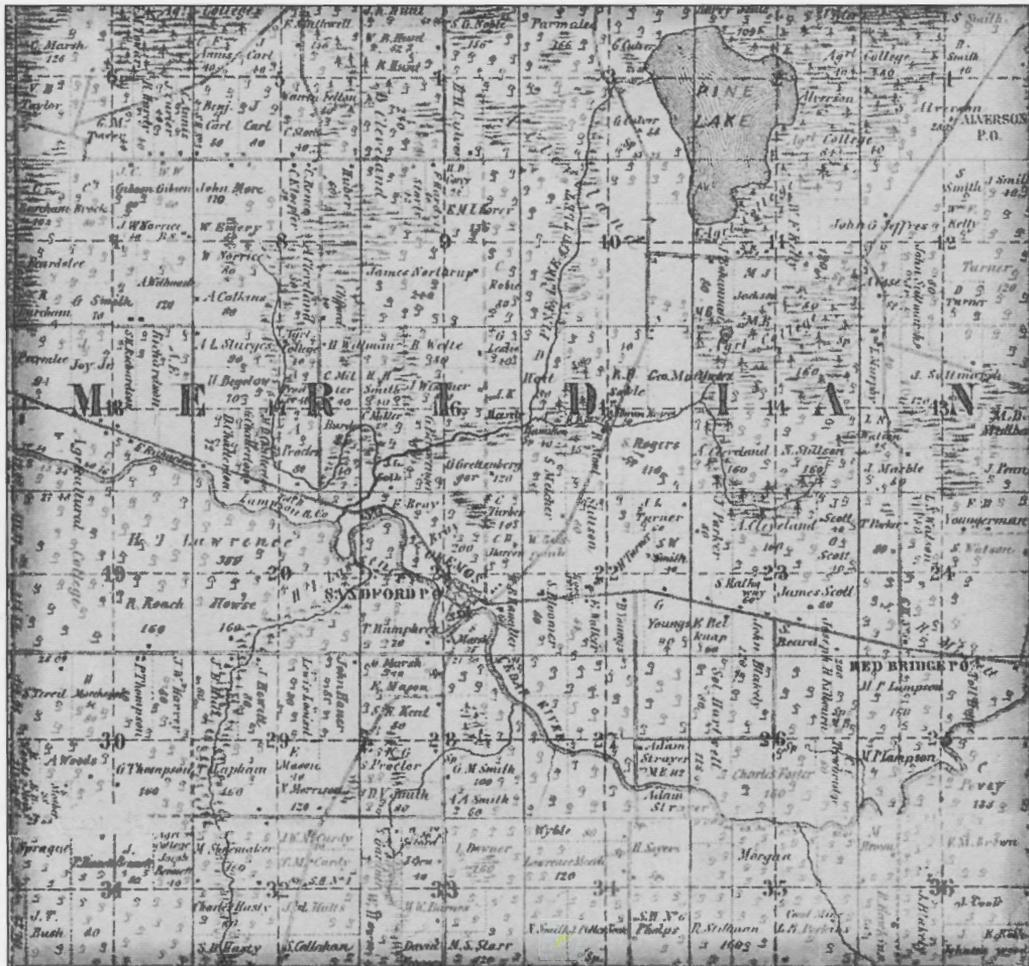
### Map Legend

1. Sanford Marsh logcabin 1839
2. Old Okemos Cemetery
3. Freeman Bray & Joseph Killbourne
4. New Bray Farm
5. Kilbourne Farm house . 1842
6. Myron W Barnes loghouse
7. Melior Turner home
8. Cooper Shop of Daniel Youngs
9. First one-room school bldg.
10. Walker store - 1853
11. Okemos house or Barnes House - an inn
12. "Union House" - Hotel
13. Davis Mill
14. Bray's Sawmill & Cabinet shop
15. Ebenezer Walker Saw and Grist Mill
16. Presbyterian Church
17. Baptist Church
18. Methodist Church
19. Detroit and Grand River Rd.

The little village of Hamilton continued to grow and, by 1853, boasted a minimum of eight businesses at the crossroads of State Road and Detroit Road. The local families continued to build private residences along the two routes and had numerous interactions with the local natives of the area, specifically Chief Okemos and his followers. Some of the business sites were located on property traditionally used by Okemos. The chief even referred to the camping area along the river as "Okemos City."



Chief Okemos of the Chippewa was highly respected by his followers and held in high regard by the white settlers. After his death in 1858, the village of Hamilton was renamed Okemos at the request of the citizens. His memory and bravery continue to be honored today.



The above topographical map was printed in 1859, one year after the village was officially named Okemos. The map clearly shows the new village name in the center, along with "Sanford P.O." The post office for the area continued to be named after the first white settler to the river community until May 1862, when it was also officially renamed Okemos.

## Seven

# THE OKEMOS COMMUNITY GROWS

The location of the village of Okemos just six miles to the east of the state capital along the Detroit Road put the community in an ideal location to serve travelers. Transportation in the 1840s was slow and tedious as drivers needed to steer their horses around ruts and avoid muddy dirt. Travel along the dirt roads from Lansing to Detroit could take anywhere from three to five days, depending on the weather conditions. As a result, the Michigan Legislature passed the General Plank Road Act in 1848 to standardize the construction and toll rates of wooden roads. The Lansing-Howell Plank Road was chartered in 1850. The portion from Lansing to the river community of Hamilton was completed in June 1851 and extended to Howell in Livingston County by 1853. Once completed, the road reduced travel time from Lansing to Detroit from three to five days down to 10 to 12 hours.

The Barnes House and the Union House served as hotels along the road. Performers stayed in the hotels and performed in the second floor of the nearby Heathmann-Herre brick store. Educational and social improvements were made in the mid-1800s. Churches were built in the village, rural one-room schools were erected throughout the district, and land along Dobie Road was set aside for the county poor farm to serve the poor, infirm, and mentally ill.

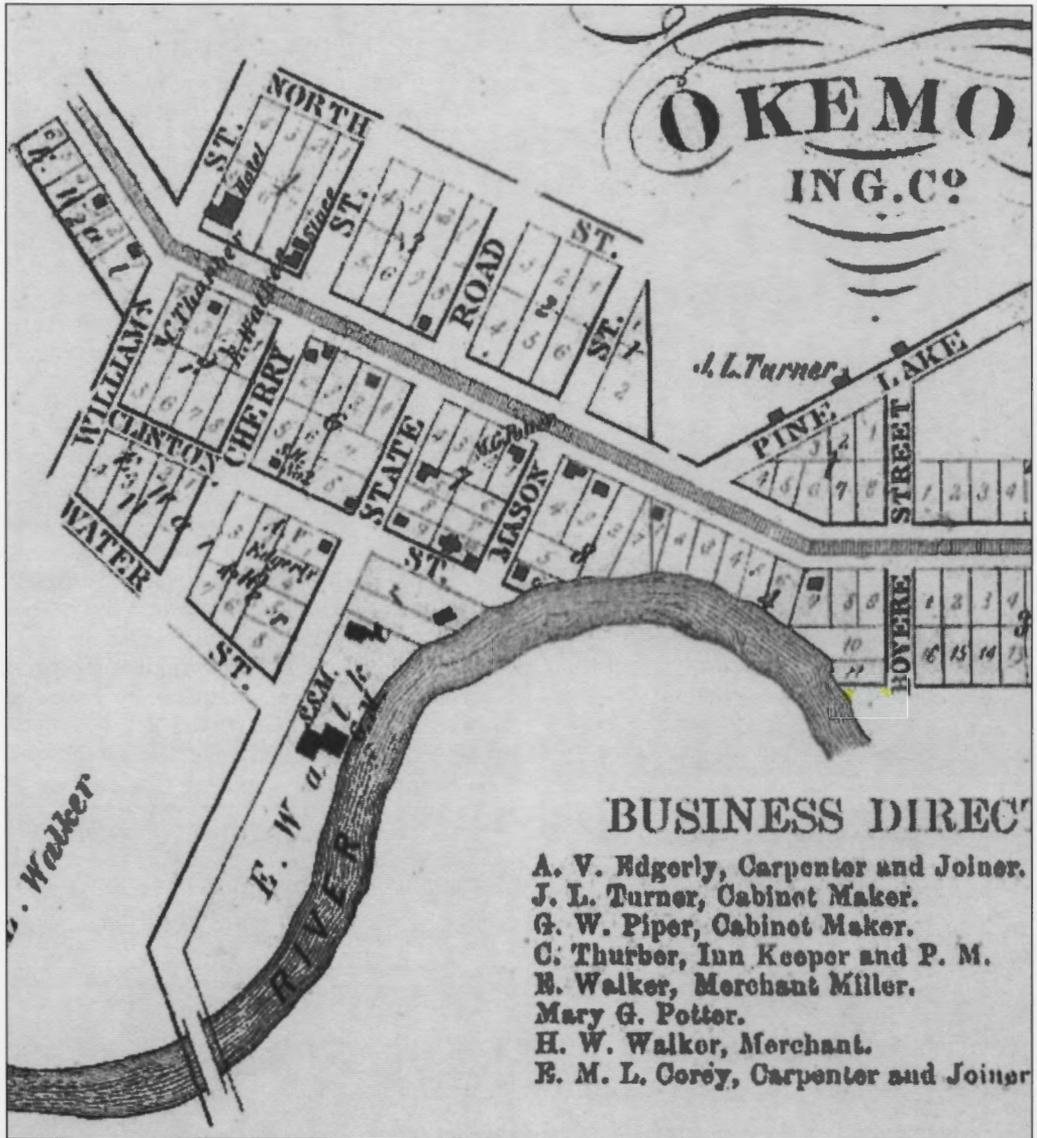
By 1874, there were three churches, three mills, two hotels, one tavern, and one store in the village. Eight rural schools were built to serve children in the greater Okemos area. Until the 1920s, there was no high school in Okemos, and students who wanted a higher education had to travel to Mason to the south or East Lansing to the west to attend the higher grades. The first consolidated school in Okemos was opened in 1923 and offered classes to intermediate and high school students.



The four corners were the primary location for development within the village of Okemos. The above photograph shows former Detroit Road, now Hamilton Road, looking to the west toward the city of Lansing. The first building is the only mansion built in Okemos and was constructed by John Orin Grettenberger, the owner of the general store immediately to the west of the property. Past the store is the brick meeting hall for the Independent Order of Odd Fellows (IOOF), a "friendly society" organized to provide community service for members in need.



The village of Okemos boasted multiple lodging sites, including the Union Hotel, identified as "1" in the above photograph. Other businesses located along the four corners to serve travelers were the Okemos House and the Bray Tavern.



One of the reasons for the need for hospitality in Okemos was the construction of a modern wooden road through the heart of the village. The plank road was built to speed travel between the capital city of Lansing to the original capital site of Detroit. The trip decreased from three to six days along rutted or muddy dirt roads down to 10 to 12 hours along the plank road.



The 1840s saw a number of residents forming their own worship groups. The worshippers originally met in members' homes until a school was built large enough to hold the congregation. The Baptist church was built on Moore Street south of the main road, now named Hamilton Road. The original building remains on Moore Street; it was enlarged and is used for apartments.

The Methodist Society formed as early as 1840 and also met in members' homes until 1849, when the school was built. The group continued to save and purchased property at the corner of Okemos Road and Methodist Street to construct its own worship site. Even so, the full amount needed to build the church was not available until 1869, and the new Methodist Episcopal church was erected on the site in 1870. The congregation outgrew the structure in the 20th century, and the building was razed in 1969 to make way for a new, larger facility. A replica of the building currently sits in the Meridian Historical Village in Central Park, Okemos.





Pictured above around the late 1880s or early 1890s is the Sunday school class of the Methodist Episcopal church. The class met in the second-floor loft next to the belfry. The teacher was Pauline Herre. The students are, from left to right, (first row) Walter Allen, Freeman Washburn, Clyde Washburn, and Martin McNeal; (second row) Vern Proctor, Charley Grettenberger, Jake Kaiser, Dewey Slimmer, and Henry Wellman.



One religious society did not fare well within the village of Okemos and, despite its efforts, was not able to establish a long-term presence. The worshippers of the Presbyterian faith built a church at the corner of Moore Street and Hamilton Road on the northwest corner across from the current-day Wood's Marathon station. After the Presbyterian congregation moved from the location, the village acquired the property and used the building for the town hall. Numerous meetings and gatherings were held in and around the building for many years, including Independence Day celebrations and military drills.



The building was later converted to the town library, which served the community until the 1950s. It was torn down in the 1960s, and a small group of local shops now inhabits the space.



Education was an important, basic need for the pioneers, and space was used where available. The first local school was convened in 1844 in a cooper shop owned by Daniel Young. The school was located east of Okemos along Hamilton Road, and Samantha Worden taught the children for \$1 a week. A minimum of five children needed to be enrolled for the school to have legal status; two of the five children were enrolled at age three in order to meet the requirement.



As was common for the time, numerous small schools were built throughout the township to allow children to walk to school. More often than not, the land was donated or loaned by a local family who had school-age children. The Bennett School was built at the corner of Bennett and Hagadorn Roads and continued in operation at that site until the consolidation of all rural schools into one central site in 1921. The superintendent of Okemos schools then moved the building to Mount Hope Road west of Okemos Road and converted it to a private residence.

  
**OKEMOS**  
**UNION SCHOOL.**  
 \*  
 T E R M :  
 Nov. 14, 1887—March 9, 1888.  
 \*  
 THERON C. NORTH.  
 T E A C H E R .  


Theron C. North, age 32, taught at the Union School during the winter term of November 1887 through March 9, 1888. School years were generally split into three terms: autumn, winter, and spring. Some larger communities also offered limited classes during the summer. Most communities preferred to hire a male teacher for the winter term, as this might be the only time of the year the older boys from the area farms could attend school. A stronger, male influence was seen as necessary in order to control the "big boys."

Girls' Names.		Boys' Names.	
Rosa Kirk, Effie Melcher, Lydia Baby, Della Douglas, * Bertha Cook, * Emma Butts, * Lulu Avery, Minnie Kaiser, Ella Boland, * Clara North, Flora North, Mary Hagerman, Alvia Kirkpatrick, * Mary Kirkpatrick, * Cora Loomis, Allie Chapin.	Lottie Cook, Effie Hunt, Mary Grettenburger, * Gracie Carver, Stella Kitchen, * Belle Hopkins, Tena Wellman, Minnie Orse, Anna Boland, Maud McManmon, * Mary Kaiser, Lillie Mezveren, Ettie Phillips, Emma Burtraw, Myrtle Kenedy.	Bert Hagerman, John Grettenburger, Frank Alverson, Archie Hewitt, John Cody, John Elliott, Clifford Foster, Jake Kaiser, George Grettenburger, Henry Wellman, Clyde Washburn, Robbie Osborn, Charlie Grettenburger, * Albert Kirkpatrick.	John Proctor, Charlie Ferguson, Lewie Fuller, George Hardy, Peter Cody, Frank McManmon, Fred Dingman, * Willis Briggs, Meritt Hewitt, Vernal Proctor, Richard Phillips, George Turner, Harmon Herre, * Macy Laphan.

By 1885, Okemos had grown large enough to need a "senior department" for the older children. The senior department of the day did not necessarily refer to the senior class in a modern-day high school, but to the children who had progressed to the highest reading and study levels. The purpose of the asterisks next to student's names was explained by the teacher, A.R. Hardy, who said, "As an inducement to secure punctuality and good deportment, I promised to have the names of pupils printed at the close of the term, marking with an asterisk (\*) those who refrained from whispering."



Emma Niebling served as a teacher for most of her adult life. Having never married, she could continue her career in the field. She primarily taught the younger students. The above photograph from October 1913 includes, from left to right, (first row) Orin Grettenberger, Harold Edgar, William McKane, and Gerald Allen; (second row) unidentified, Lavina Strayer, ? Baldwin, Anna Strayer, Rhea Eberly, Alice Heathman, Mildred Roberts, Ruth Sturges, and Glenn Torrance; (third row) Charles Deeg, Garnet Honsberger, Warren Brown, ? Brown, Carrie Hammond, Rosa Olds, Frank Evert, Larue Clark, and Russel Clark; (fourth row) Emma Niebling, Eva Allen, Leah Brown, Howard Hammond, Clair Smith, Leo Clever, ? Brown, Leota Holtz, and Florence Olds.



The "little school" continued to serve students even after the consolidation of the rural one-room schools into a central location in 1921. The little school served the youngest grades, and the students benefited from the small classes in a less chaotic environment than could be found at consolidated school, with its multiple grades of older students. The students pictured above in November 1921 are not identified. Their teacher (not pictured) was Alice Moore.



The above photograph shows the intermediate class of the old Okemos School prior to 1921. Student names are unavailable. The teacher, shown in the upper right corner, was Agnes Polhenins Young. Once the large, brick, consolidated school was opened in 1921, all intermediate classes were transferred to that building, and the old school became known as the "little school."



The quality of education received in rural one-room schools varied greatly depending on the resources of the community, and some graduates from eighth grade found entry into an area high school difficult. By 1920, Okemos followed the statewide trend of consolidating area schools into one central location to combine resources. The above photograph is of the Okemos consolidated school at the corner of Okemos and Mount Hope Roads. School buses were introduced to transport students living in far corners of the district.



The intermediate students were now being prepared for higher education. Before the consolidation of schools in 1921, an Okemos student would need to travel either south to Mason or west to East Lansing to pursue a high school degree. Pictured above in 1924, Irene Beaumont taught the 10-year-olds at the sixth-grade level. Names of the students are unknown.



Another photograph from 1924 shows the combined classes of the seventh and eighth grades. As was common with the older students, a male teacher was employed to keep the male students in check. The students are not identified; however, the teacher is G.C. White.



The above image from 1925 shows a full enrollment for the new high school at the Okemos consolidated building. Once the school was consolidated in 1921, local students could receive a high school education without having to travel to other cities. Pictured are, from left to right and top to bottom, (first row) Rex Beaumont, two unidentified students, Frances Hadley, unidentified, Velma Eberly, Wilma Kinney, Elsie Dietz, and Harold Edgar; (second row) Lucille McKane, two unidentified students, Vera Gubbins, Orin Grettenberger, Marie Blinn, Moneta Wilkins, Rhea Eberly, Howard Collins, Elsie Greenfield, Grant BeVier, three unidentified students, and Elton Daniels; (third row) Frank Coleman, three unidentified students, Irene Turau, Naomi Wilkins, two unidentified students, Carleton Beaumont, Bernie Hague, Howard McClure, Milton Stevens, Fannie Williams, Charlotte Hammond, and unidentified; (fourth row) Laura Woodworth, Maynard Eberly, three unidentified students, Bernie Fink, four unidentified students, Marjory Eberly, William McKane, unidentified, Ruth Huff, and Spencer Worthington; (fifth row) two unidentified students, Gladys Gubbins, unidentified, Merle Wilcox, Maynard Dietz, Alberta Russell, unidentified, Frances Turau, Eugene Williams, Ernest Jennings, Ida Strayer, Ralph Guile, Mildred Roberts, and Albert Dormer; (sixth row) two unidentified students, Philip Woodworth, Robert Hadley, Jessie Fink, two unidentified students, and Lois Webster.



By 1925, G.C. White was listed as the superintendent. He oversaw the education of all the students and mentored those who wished to finish their studies at the highest level possible. The class of 1925 finished out the year with a total of seven (five males and two females) completing their exercises. Pictured here from left to right are (first row) G.C. White, Elsie Greenfield, Marie ?, and Albert Dormer; (second row) Philip Woodworth, Bernie Hagué, Eugene Williams, and Harold Edgar.



G.C. White also oversaw the graduating class of 1926. In the photograph above are, from left to right, (first row) Thelma McClure, Bernice Bitgood, Moneta Wilkins, Velma Eberly, Laura Woodworth, and Marjorie Eberly; (second row) Carlton Beaumont, Merle Wilcox, Orin Grettenberger, Lee O'Caroll, and Marion Kinney.



Prior to World War I, ladies' fashions limited the types of activities they could participate in. When the fashions changed after 1918, females became more active in sports. The trend of the time encouraged team sports for health and discipline. Pictured above are, from left to right, (first row) Jo Currier, Jennie R. (last name not listed), Velma Eberly, Marjorie Eberly, Moneta Wilkins, Laura Woodworth, and Wilma Kinney; (second row) Fannie Williams, Marjorie Woodworth, Delsie R. (last name not listed), Alberta Russell, and superintendent G.C. White.



World War I had a major impact on the Okemos area, largely because many of the pioneer families were German Americans who wished to distance themselves from the German kaiser and his attacks on other European countries. Many local families stopped using the German pronunciation of their names and switched to the Anglicized forms; for example, "Georg" became "George," or "Johann" became "John." Military drills occurred in Okemos around the "little school" building. The above c. 1918 photograph shows the female soldiers standing at attention.



The female soldiers participated in drills at patriotic events to the delight of the local residents. In this c. 1918 photograph, they drill around the flagpole at the elementary school in Okemos.

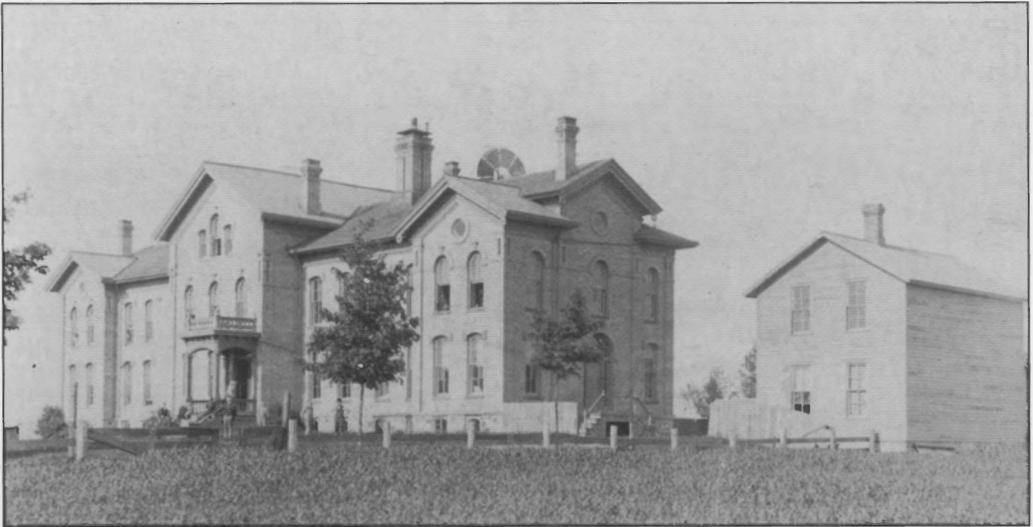


The year 1918 saw a surge of patriotism as the United States entered the Great War in Europe. Not yet called World War I, it was thought to be the "war to end all wars." Uncle Sam and his calf attended the Independence Day festivities at the Okemos Town Hall on July 4, 1918.

This is also the  
e/m. school (as also  
shown above)



The town hall in the center of Okemos became a gathering spot for local residents interested in demonstrating their patriotism and voicing their support for American troops fighting in the war. The local German American residents were sensitive to their ancestry and were especially diligent in demonstrating their support for their adopted country. This photograph was taken around 1918 in front of town hall.



Each county set aside a portion of farm property to serve those in need. The homeless, ill, and indigent were housed on the farm, and those physically able would work the farm to help support the tenants. The poor farm was moved from Alaiedon Township to Meridian Township in 1878 and was located along Dobie Road, north of Jolly Road. A small cemetery is located on the property for those who died while in residence. Dates on the grave markers run from the 1890s to 1942. There is no evidence of graves dating to the 1920s because a university offered to pay for bodies to be used for research. The former poorhouse is now Carriage Lanes Apartments on Dobie Road.

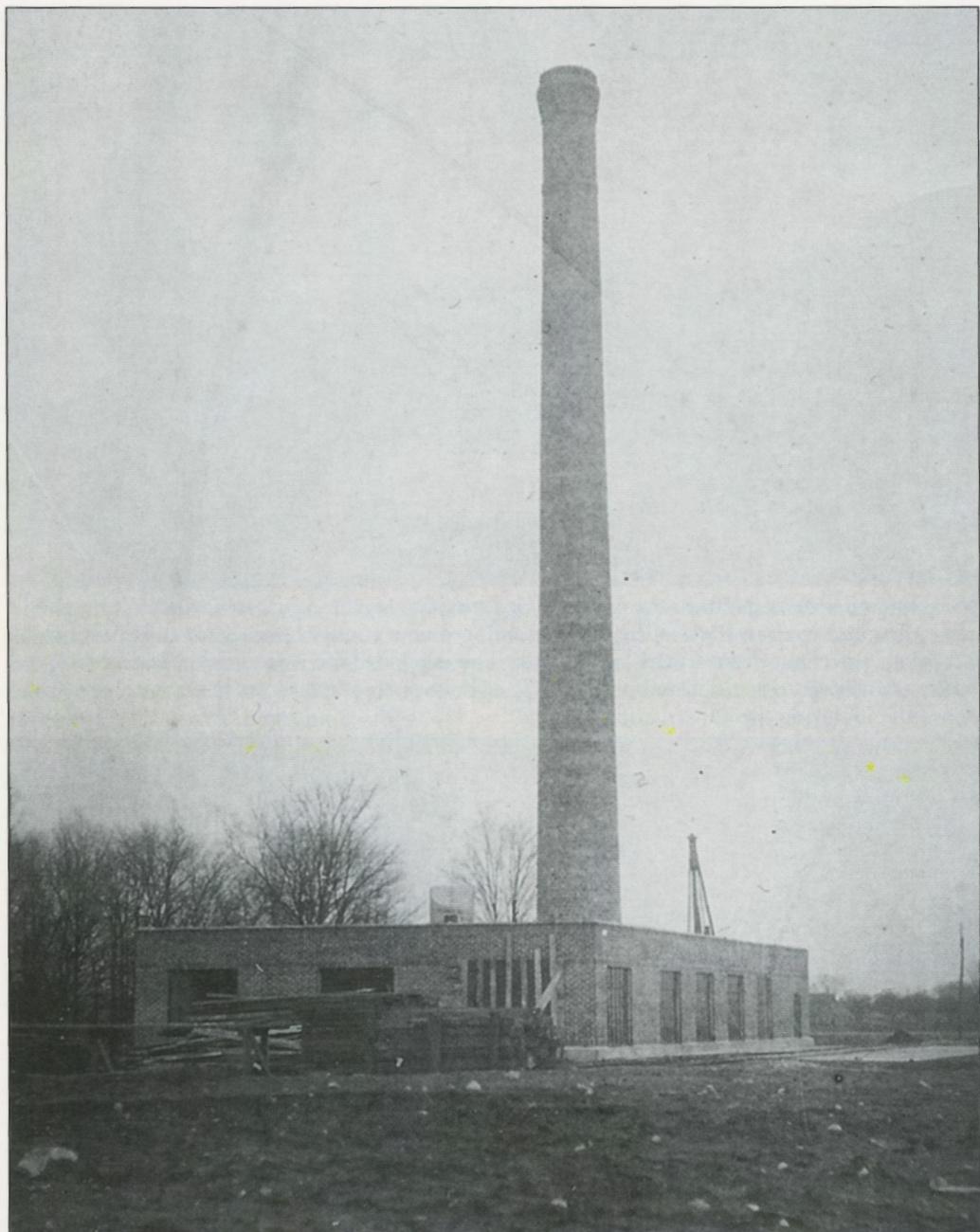


The poor farm burned down in 1885, and a number of residents perished. A later building was constructed of brick to decrease the possibility of destruction. Over time, and especially after veterans returned home from the World War I, the county changed the focus to serve the ill and infirm rather than the destitute. The farm became a county hospital for those who could not afford the care offered in the larger cities. The expanded focus required a modern hospital facility, which was constructed about 1930. The above photograph shows temporary barracks to house the ill during the construction.



The village of Okemos was the closest community to the county poor farm/hospital on Dobie Road and served as the host for those in need of temporary housing. Temporary barracks were constructed in the center of Okemos near the old elementary school in 1930. The above photograph shows the temporary location at the corner of (Clinton Street and Okemos Road.)

(NE " " & Ardmore St.)



The area along Dobie Road became known as the location of buildings related to human services. A movement began in the 1920s to construct a prison along the road for female prisoners only. The closest area prison was located to the south in Jackson and provided cell housing for men and also separate buildings for women. The supporters of this idea pushed the governor to build the prison, and construction proceeded with the erection of a building intended to generate the power necessary for the facility. Because of the economy and lack of resources, the governor put off construction until there was no longer enough support to move forward. The power plant in the above photograph has been removed.



The Michigan Bureau of Highways built a state road in the 1920s that bypassed the little village to improve the flow and speed of traffic. It was built north of Hamilton Road and cut through the farm property of the Bray family. Savvy businessmen such as John O. and Orin K. Grettenberger realized that, if their business was to survive, they would need to move to the main four corners of the village.



Rather than abandon the building that had housed their business for years, the Grettenbergers arranged to move the structure to the new site. The above photograph shows the excavation to raise the building to allow for transport.



The building was moved just one short block east from the corner of Hamilton and Ardmore Roads to its new home at the corner of Hamilton and Okemos Roads. The new owner, Orin K. Grettenberger, and his father, John O., are shown enjoying the ride to their new site.



The store was covered in brick after the move, and Orin K. Grettenberger expanded the operation to include a pharmacy and soda fountain. The store continued in operation into the 1980s, and the building remains at the site today and houses a martial arts studio.



The same corner of Okemos and Hamilton Roads housed other businesses looking to weather the decreased traffic when the road bypass was built in the 1920s. A grocery store was located on the southeast corner (left side of photograph), and a Sunoco gas station was located on the southwest corner. In the foreground of the photograph is the signpost directing travelers to Lansing to the west and Williamston and Detroit to the east.

An aerial photograph taken by Talbert "Ted" Abrams of the village of Okemos shows how construction of the road bypass affected the growth and development of the area. The new road, built in the 1920s, cut Bray farmland in half, making it very difficult to farm on both sides. Bray chose to plat the portion of his property south of the new road, Grand River Avenue, to be sold for residences. The new neighborhood was named Cedar Bend Heights. Even so, the area remained largely rural, with farmland and pastures abutting the little village until rapid development began in the late 1960s and early 1970s.





Another aerial photograph by Abrams shows the village in the 1970s and the beginning of major development of Okemos. The large parking area in the upper right portion of the photograph served the new Meijer store built in the 1970s. The Michigan-based company started with two area locations, one in Okemos and another in south Lansing. In recent years, the company has added three more stores to the Greater Lansing area, one in Delta Township, one on the north side of East Lansing, and the most recent addition in Bath Township just north of Haslett.

Meridian Township began as a collection of small pioneer communities. Pine Lake was the largest body of water in Ingham County, and Native tribes camped along its shores and cut a trail along the west side of the lake. White pioneers appeared in 1836 and began to turn the thick forests into viable farmland. In the late 19th century, James Haslett helped establish a community focused on the practices of spiritualism. The new Haslett Park community hosted a summer camp for believers, and the little Pine Lake community was renamed Haslett and the lake to Lake Lansing. The village of Okemos began as a settlement along the Red Cedar River, the major waterway south of Lake Lansing. The area was the seasonal campsite for Chief Okemos and his Chippewa and Ottawa followers. The community was originally named Sanford after the first white settler, renamed Hamilton after Andrew Hamilton, and finally to Okemos in honor of the old chief who died in the 1850s.

Jane Rose, the executive director of the Meridian Historical Village, has provided images from the archives of the Friends of Historic Meridian for this pictorial history. Rose has worked in the field of living history museums for over a decade and is the author of several columns on local history.

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Our Association is working on a directory and history of every student (and teacher) of Okemos Schools. Several decades are complete, but we have run out of a list of names for many of the years prior to 1923. Your book has a scattering of the earlier years, many with pictures.

May we reference your book for names and the picture of faces where identified?

With your permission, the names and faces will appear on our website [OkemosAlumni.org](http://OkemosAlumni.org) . Please, take a look. We would like to credit your publication and post your order information.

*Rod Ellis*  
Okemos Class of 1965  
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[rodellis1000@aol.com](mailto:rodellis1000@aol.com)  
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Executive Director  
Meridian Historical Village

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