

# Black Oak and After

## Oak Lawn Round-Up 1949-1958

Issue prepared by Gordon Welles, revised by Kevin Korst



Village merchants, dressed as bandits, pose on horseback in front of Oak Lawn Trust & Savings Bank, rechristened the “Silver Dollar Bank” during Round-Up. c. 1950 courtesy: Dorothy Beckley.

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## **ORIGIN OF CONCEPT**

Oak Lawn, like many southwest suburban Chicago communities, experienced a tremendous surge in growth after World War II. Large-scale housing developments were altering the landscape. Competition for prospective home builders and home buyers was intense; many villages and cities were doing friendly battle with one another for the attention of young families moving from Chicago. One of the outcomes was a growth of special festivals to promote town assets. Oak Lawn's contribution to this phenomenon was "Round-Up Days", a celebration which came to be one of the largest annual events in the state.

Round-Up Days began as a National Safety Week parade. Clarence Watson, a local resident and head of the Oak Lawn Safety Council, approached Charles McKay, the president of the Oak Lawn Chamber of Commerce, for assistance in organization and publicity. The Chamber agreed to participate and decided to encourage all local businesses to hold a special sale (Dollar Day) to coincide with the parade. A publicity committee was formed, and as a result of their discussions, a more ambitious plan for the event began to take shape. Lynn Storey, a prominent Oak Lawn contractor, and James Sweeney, proprietor of the Oak Lawn News Agency, were two of the most influential voices in the early planning process. Largely through their persuasion, an historical theme was chosen.

During Chicago's early days, bands of robbers on horseback used selected locations west of the old Vincennes Trail and Western Avenue as hideouts, from which they would raid upon hapless travelers who used these two routes. Consequently, several areas on Chicago's southwest side became known as "Horsethief Hollow". At the time that the committee was considering alternatives, local folklore had it that the highwaymen made use of the oak groves here for just such a purpose. Although research has not confirmed that outlaws ever did gather in Oak Lawn, the excitement and romance implicit in the story may have overridden any questions of historical accuracy, if any were raised. Ready availability of horses at several nearby riding stables made a Wild West theme practical as well.

### **EARLY ROUND-UPS**

October 14 and 15, 1949 were slated as the days for the parade and other activities. For this first Round-Up, the Chamber found itself having to make all arrangements in a three week period. Their first efforts were rewarded; approximately 25,000 people witnessed the parade and related events. Although the Oak Lawn Independent of September 17, 1953 described the first parade as nothing more than a few cars, bicycles and six merchants on horseback (presumed to be an understatement), the enthusiastic response convinced the Chamber, and all of Oak

Lawn, that the promotion was a stroke of genius. Considerable media attention was generated throughout the region. Based on this initial success, the Oak Lawn Chamber of Commerce was prepared to hold the Round-Up as an annual affair.



Roland Beckley, local Chamber of Commerce member, in full western dress on 95th Street. c. 1950 courtesy: Dorothy Beckley.

Naturally, the Chamber had ideas of making the following year's Round-Up "bigger and better." Increasing numbers of hours were devoted to planning. In 1950, the Chamber rented a vacant store along 95th Street to serve as Round-Up headquarters, where committee members met daily to map out strategy for the event.

Although it is not clear to what extent other local organizations participated in the original celebration, by 1950 several groups were sponsoring booths and other amusements. The Lynwood Women's Club and the Oak Lawn Fire Department Auxiliary each sold "ten-gallon hats", at opposite ends of the village. The Oak Lawn Homeowners Association peddled western novelties in the center of the village, while the Johnson-Phelps VFW Post and the Green Oak Post of the American Legion joined forces to manage a carnival. Refreshments for adults were dispensed by the Oak Lawn Athletic Association, while the younger set was served at "Kiddie Bars" operated by the Lions Club. An open-air barbecue was manned by the Oak Lawn Fire Department. Other organizations, like the Oak Lawn Sportsman's Club, St. Gerald Men's Club and even the Oak Lawn Swimming Pool Fund also participated.

Square dancing was a principal element of the festivities from the beginning. Areas were set aside for both competitive and noncompetitive use.

Square dance sets from Oak Lawn and the entire region would compete against one another for awards and prizes, accompanied by well-known bands and callers.

One of the highlights of the Round-Up were the mock events, such as an incident of horse thievery or a stagecoach holdup, followed by a chase, capture of the desperadoes and administration of justice, frontier-style. A description for the September 28, 1950 Oak Lawn Independent captures the flavor of the scene:

**This year as the “hooker” for the Round-Up, the Chamber of Commerce will stage a holdup of an old stage coach, complete with shootin’ bandits, led by the notorious “Fearless Freddi”, one of the roughest, toughest hombres ever to draw a “hoglaig” in the area.**

**“Fearless” and his gang of cutthroats will make off with pseudo gold bullion...Posses will take off in pursuit almost immediately and are expected to be in evidence throughout the three days, chasing the outlaws around the town, amidst the constant crack of six shooters.**

**It is hoped by the vigilantes, composed of every able bodied man who can throw a leg over a “cayuse,” that they corner the bandit horde and string ‘em up sometime Saturday.**

The major focus continued to be on the parade, however, and the Chamber encouraged all participating businesses and civic organizations to develop western themes.

Horse-and-buggies, Conestoga wagons, antique hand-pumped fire-fighting equipment, horse-drawn hayracks, nearly 100 floats and a total of over 400 horses and riders all were part of the 1950 parade. Worth, Palos Heights, Palos Park and the unincorporated areas of Grandview Park and Columbus Manor placed entries in the event.

Blue Island High School, Stickney Township High School, Warren Weaver's Accordion Band, the Gasparato School of Music and two American Legion posts provided music for the crowds. Store owners did their best to decorate the parade route with appropriate window displays, and hitching posts were installed at various locations along 95 Street.

## **A MAJOR EVENT**

The project seemed to gather momentum each year. Even as early as 1950, reports of attendance in excess of 100,000 for the three day period were circulating. Along with success, however, came special logistical problems. By 1952, Oak Lawn Police were assisted by law officers from several surrounding towns, military police and uniformed ushers. In 1950, the Chamber was already making use of radio-equipped vehicles to help coordinate the parade.

In fact, the entire program became so large by its fourth presentation in 1952, the Chamber had come to realize they could no longer manage everything themselves. After interviewing representatives from several promotion companies, Frank Cole, an Oak Lawn resident with appropriate experience, was hired to coordinate activities. Robert Revolt, another local citizen, provided advice and other assistance in arranging the concessions. Mr. Cole, and later, his wife, Peggy, were involved in managing the Round-Up until its demise.

Once the continued success of the Round-Up seemed assured, the attitude of the Chamber and other organizations toward the event underwent a change. Originally, the principal purpose behind staging the Round-Up was to promote Oak Lawn as an inviting community in which to settle and raise a family. According to available accounts, little effort was made to utilize Round-Up activities for fundraising. However, in 1951, Chamber of Commerce president Elmer Buell advanced the idea that all local associations should take advantage of the publicity and crowds to make the Round-Up their single money-making effort each year. For their part, the Chamber continued to donate any net profit to causes in the village which the organization deemed worthy. In 1952, the \$6,000 profit went to Oak Lawn Community High School for its athletic field and related facilities.



Antique fire fighting apparatus, such as this piece of equipment, were often seen in Round-Up parades. c. 1952 courtesy: Nadine Blocker.

A key to the success of the Round-Up was the widespread publicity which the Chamber and others were able to generate. After appearing on WGN's Newsreel four times as a result of the initial celebration, the community realized the importance of appearing before the public to "plug" the Round-Up. In 1952, the Chamber's Publicity Committee appeared on at least eight radio and television programs. Similar efforts were carried on by the local performing group and organizations. Their cumulative efforts three years later led to full page coverage in every major newspaper in the Chicagoland area, in addition to television and radio spots. In that same year, WGN televised the entire parade, with commentator Jack Brickhouse as master of ceremonies.

In 1957, WGN hosted a session of its variety talent radio program, the “Big Ten Party,” on the main event stage of the Round-Up.

As the publicity reached larger proportions, so did the entire Round-Up; and several other special attractions were added. One of the most popular was Oak Lawn’s version of “prospecting”. Several locations were designated as “mines,” with such rustic names as “Bonanza No. 4” and “Cripple Creek. In actuality, they were large piles of sand with a generous quantity of capsules buried under the surface. Each capsule contained coupons redeemable for prizes from local merchants, which in some cases were substantial. Mink scarves, a \$500 house down payment, major appliances and even a week’s vacation for two in Las Vegas were among the big items awarded. Each shovelful of sand sold for a quarter, and some lucky “prospectors” came away from their labors very happy.

A “mystery rider” also became a fixture of the Round-Up festivities. Normally a prominent local resident, he remained masked throughout the week, riding through town promoting the Round-Up. Contests were held to guess his identity and prizes were awarded for the most cleverly worded correct guesses. In addition, the “mystery rider” distributed coupons for a village-wide “lucky shopper” promotion, which one year resulted in a new car going to some fortunate patron of local businesses.



Crowd along 95th Street for 1952 Round-Up parade. Over 100,000 people attended Round-Up activities that year. courtesy: Nadine Blocker.

Rodeo events, a queen contest, stage shows and other special attractions, such as a replica of an early Wabash Railroad locomotive and “the world’s tallest man,” heightened the excitement of Round-Up Days.

## **PROBLEMS**

Such was the magnitude of the event, it was not surprising that troubles did occur. Newspapers reported occasional thievery – even an attempted horse rustling which was not part of the scheduled program – and other minor incidents.

The major concern of local residents was fear that the town was being taken over by “outsiders.” Underage drinking and general rowdiness were often cited as a major problem. In addition, certain elements of the community began to feel that the entire event had become too “commercial.”

Homemade floats gave way to professionally constructed varieties; people from outlying areas were required to assist in staging the Round-Up due to its increasing size and complexity, causing the event to stray from its originally unpretentious small-town orientation.

School District 123 PTA was the most vocal organization in opposition to the changing character of the Round-Up. Withdrawing from participation in 1953, after basing its decision on a monetary clause in its national charter, the PTA also cited the tacit acceptance of underage drinking and rowdiness as inappropriate for a community concerned with a “wholesome moral atmosphere” for its children.

Criticism increased from the PTA in subsequent years, culminating in a letter to Village President Harvey Wick which appeared on the front page of the Oak Lawn Independent, decrying the village’s insensitivity to the educational needs and safety of its children during the celebration.

A spirited debate was waged in the papers, with a large percentage of Round-Up supporters voicing their views, but the criticism took its toll. The Chamber members and other citizens who were donating countless hours of volunteer labor each year found it difficult to continue eagerly in the face of such attacks.

A concerted effort was made in 1958 to return the event to its “grass-roots” beginnings by effectively banning outside (non-Oak Lawn) assistance in preparation and staging, but the decision seemed to reduce the level of excitement about the event.

With the special Wild West attractions kept to a minimum, ostensibly to prevent drawing the less desirable elements of the population to the Round-Up, those who did come apparently viewed the revised format as unacceptably tame in comparison to previous years.

### **A PARTING THOUGHT**

Although the village recouped some of the enthusiasm in celebrating its fiftieth anniversary the following summer, the spirit which created the Round-Up was dead. In retrospect, it is unfortunate that circumstances caused the Round-Up to fall into disfavor. Despite the very real difficulties encountered, most surviving participants look back with fond memories on a time when they and their neighbors got together once a year for their own special celebration.

**“THANKS”**

**Fred Dumke, Mary Lotz, Audrie Buell, Mrs. Russell Walton and Mrs. Warren Potter graciously reminisced about their involvement with the Round-Up. Special thanks to Dorothy Beckley for loan of photographs.**





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