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The Search for Perfection: Lake Forest and the Progressive Era

Abstract

Lake Forest, Illinois in the Progressive Era was a highly exclusive safe haven for the elite of Chicago. Lake Forest, however, was more than a high priced suburb for successful businessmen and the children of entrepreneurs; it was a community where wealthy individuals would attempt to create the perfect environment. This paper will explore how the residents attempted to create a perfect community, from the European culture they chose to imitate to the architecture they chose for their estates, as well as the social world they created for themselves.

Keywords

Lake Forest, Illinois, Progressive Era

The Search for Perfection: Lake Forest and the Progressive Era

Caitlin Carr

Lake Forest, Illinois was founded in 1856 by the Lake Forest Association, a group of well-to-do, educated men who quietly bought up two thousand acres of land to form Lake Forest.¹ From its inception, Lake Forest, situated thirty miles north of Chicago and perched on the western shore of Lake Michigan, was tightly controlled by its influential residents. In 1857, before any houses or businesses were built, the Association brought in Almerin Hotchkiss, a landscape designer, to create a layout for the town.² Hotchkiss created a plan based on the principles of the picturesque, a nineteenth century English romantic landscape movement.³ By the beginning of the Progressive Era in the 1890s, Lake Forest was firmly established not only as a highly exclusive community, but also as the only socially acceptable retreat for wealthy Chicagoans and their families during the summer months.⁴ However, Lake Forest was more than a high-priced suburb for successful businessmen, entrepreneurs, and their families; it was also a community where wealthy individuals attempted to create the perfect world. While progressives across the country sought to reform society in diverse ways, with the ultimate goal of perfecting society, the residents of Lake Forest attempted to construct the perfect community, while avoiding many of the social ills that plagued the city of Chicago. Lake Foresters' vision of utopia was based on an idealized version of Europe; it was also tightly controlled, beautiful, tranquil, and full of gaiety. This vision is clearly illustrated in the architecture Lake Foresters chose for their estates, in the design of the town center, and in the social world they created.

The American Communities Company, in a 1916 book on Lake Forest, observed, "Lake Forest is known to-day as one of the most beautiful suburban towns in the country."⁵ What made Lake Forest beautiful was in great part the natural terrain, but the man-made estates were also an integral part of what gave the town its unique beauty. A number of these estates, designed by renowned architects, were built during the Progressive Era. The great majority of these houses were also built in European styles, from English country houses to Italian villas. The Villa Turicum, designed by Charles A. Platt for Harold McCormick and Edith Rockefeller McCormick, was the most lavish of these European-style mansions.⁶ Built in 1912 to resemble a Renaissance Italian villa, Villa Turicum boasted forty-four rooms and was situated on three hundred acres of land.⁷ Charles Platt also designed the Italianate gardens that surrounded the Villa Turicum, which held treasures such as old world statuary and sought to "rival the Villa d'Este in its gardens."⁸

¹ American Communities Company, Chicago, *Lake Forest*, (Chicago: American Communities Company, 1916) <http://libsysdigi.library.illinois.edu/oca/Books2007-07/lakeforest00amer/> (accessed March 27, 2010), 105. Kim Coventry, Daniel Meyer, and Arthur H. Miller, *Classic Country Estates of Lake Forest: Architecture and Landscape Design 1856-1940* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2003), 14.

² Coventry, Meyer, and Miller, *Classic Country Estates*, 26.

³ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

⁴ Arthur Meeker, *Chicago With Love: A Polite and Personal History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955), 82-83.

⁵ American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 103.

⁶ Coventry, Meyer, and Miller, *Classic Country Estates*, 143.

⁷ Edward Arpee, *Lake Forest, Illinois: History and Reminiscences 1861-1961* (Lake Forest: the rotary club, 1964), 185-186.

⁸ Arpee, *History and Reminiscences*, 185. John, Burchard, and Albert Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America: A Social and Culture History* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1961), 292.

A simple explanation for the surfeit of European architecture in Lake Forest and other wealthy towns across America is that American architecture schools were in their nascence. The first architecture program had only been established at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1866, so many young American architects would study in America for a few years before flocking to the long-established European schools, such as L'Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris.⁹

Although the style of architecture in Lake Forest is related to the fact that most American architects of the time were European trained, the architecture the clients chose illustrates a deeper fascination with Europe. The allure that Europe had for wealthy Americans, including Lake Foresters, runs like a thread throughout the Progressive Era. The elite went abroad to Europe, bought European art by the old masters, married their daughters to European aristocracy, and of course, built European style homes.¹⁰ So what caused Europe to so captivate their attention? Lake Foresters believed that Europe—not the Europe of their era but an older Europe—was part of a simpler, purer time, a time when the rich were separated from the poor and the accompanying social ills because the rich lived in palaces far away from everything dirty and unsightly. It made sense, then, if Lake Foresters saw this idealized Europe as a better, safer place, that they would try to emulate it, in the same way the English Victorians attempted to harken back to the imagined chivalry and courtly love of the middle ages. Lake Foresters sought to perfect their environment by changing it to match what they saw as perfection, which was this romanticized European ideal, in the same way that other progressives attempted to reform different aspects of American life to make America better. By building Renaissance villas with gardens that rivaled real Italian gardens in the quiet Midwest, Lake Foresters were creating a type of Camelot, a safe and secure environment that was also, as Madame X, a columnist for the *Chicago Tribune*, described, “opulent and ornamental.”¹¹

The gentleman's farm is another example of the progressive's quest for perfection by imitating a romanticized Europe. A gentleman's farm allowed the ultra-wealthy to play at the idealized life of an English country gentleman. The largest and by far most extravagant in Lake Forest, Melody Farm, was owned by J. Ogden Armour, the Chicago meat packing heir, and was completed in 1907.¹² In the early twentieth century, J. Ogden Armour was the second richest man in America, and his one thousand acre Lake Forest residence showcased that wealth.¹³ According to the American Communities Company, the extensive estate boasted “acres of smooth shaven lawns used as golf links, groves of heavy timber through which the drive winds, parks with scampering antelope, and an extensive chain of lakes in course of development.”¹⁴ As Arthur Meeker noted in his autobiography, *Chicago, with Love*, there was quite a difference between millionaires and multi-millionaires.¹⁵ Meeker, who spent his childhood summers in Lake Forest at Arcady, a much smaller estate adjacent to the Armour's, recalled, “we had

⁹ Burchard and Bush-Brown, *The Architecture of America*, 126.

¹⁰ Franz Schulze, Rosemary Cowler, and Arthur H. Miller, *30 Miles North: A History of Lake Forest College, its Town, and its City of Chicago* (Lake Forest: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 50. Maureen A. Flanagan, *America Reformed: Progressives and Progressivisms 1890s-1920s* (New York: Oxford Press University, Inc., 2007), 118.

¹¹ Mme X, “Lake Forest noted for the beauty of its country homes,” *Events in Society Circles, Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 21, 1918, <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/> (accessed March, 23, 2010).

¹² American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 131.

¹³ Arthur H. Miller, and Shirley MacDonald Paddock, *Lake Forest: Estates, People, and Culture* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2004), 67., American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 131.

¹⁴ American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 52.

¹⁵ Arthur Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 94.

everything we could possibly want—more, no doubt, than was good for us—but the Armours had that, and a great deal else as well.”¹⁶ And to run the estate of a multi-millionaire, Amour employed, according to John Halsey’s 1916 historical sketch of Lake Forest, “a little army of mechanicians, gardeners, and caretakers.”¹⁷

The important word in that quotation is “army,” for who has an army but a ruler? Melody Farm was in a sense its own little fiefdom, with Armour as its head of state. Lake Forest residents, with their massive estates, tried to create their own utopian worlds within their community, and within these estates, they were completely safe from outside ills. Halsey is not the only one to refer to Lake Forest and its residents in such terms. Madame X, on a sojourn in Lake Forest, referred to Lake Forest as “aristocratic,” and Arthur Meeker stated that at their estate, “we felt seigniorial with our hundred acres.”¹⁸ These estates resembled a former European order, in which aristocrats ruled safely from their palaces and strove to control everything. Lake Foresters also sought to control their environments and to make them better through that control. For example, the extensive gardens at the Armour residence were manicured into submission. The bushes were trimmed, the grass was an even height, the flowers seemed to bloom exactly as commanded, and even the lakes appeared to conform, as Meeker referred to them as “ornamental pieces of water.”¹⁹

So for Lake Foresters and for progressives as a whole, control was an integral part of perfection. While Lake Foresters sought to perfect their estates, the progressives attempted to control problems and perfect the country through various organizations and regulations. An article written by Mrs. Belle Lindner Israels in 1912 about regulating public amusements is an ideal illustration of the progressive belief in control. Israels argued that if the public were educated and taught which public amusements were morally acceptable, they would eventually come to believe what they had been taught.²⁰ Israels goes on to add that until such a time, some censorship will be needed for people’s own good, but eventually that would no longer be necessary.²¹ The whole article demonstrates Israels’ belief that through regulation, society could be made better, and that eventually people could become so good that they would no longer need regulation. American society would become perfect. Lake Foresters also sought that perfection; they simply sought it on a smaller scale.

While Lake Foresters attempted to control their community and perfect their estates, there were always things beyond their control. At Melody Farm, the most amusing and least serious of these, according to Arthur Meeker, was a “race of war-like swans, which were wont to chase us when ever we came near.”²² But Meeker also relates the startling discovery he made as a child observing the Armour family: “[H]aving been born and brought up in a happy family, I found it disturbing to learn that there were unhappy ones, too, not only in story-books, but living

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 131.

¹⁸ Mme X, “Lake Forest noted for the beauty of its country homes,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 21, 1918, <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/> (accessed March, 23, 2010), Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 94.

¹⁹ Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 94. American Communities Company, “*A Melody Farm*,” *Formal Garden*, ca. 1916, 54.

²⁰ Belle Lindner Israels, “Regulation of Public Amusements,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science in the City of New York* 2, no. 4 (July 1912): 598.

²¹ Ibid

²² Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 94.

next door, as next door goes in the country.”²³ The Armours, while creating a faux-European fiefdom to rule and control their physical environment (minus the war-like swans) down to the last blade of grass, were unable to perfect their marriage. In fact, J. Ogden Armour and his wife could not even stand to be in the same house, as Meeker recalled: “What struck us youngsters as curious, in the later years in Lake Forest, was that when Mr. Armour came to Mellody Farms, Mrs. Armour left it—and vice versa.”²⁴

Harold McCormick and his wife, Edith Rockefeller McCormick, who had commissioned the magnificent Villa Turicum, were another prominent Lake Forest couple who could not perfect their marriage. However, while the Armours stayed married, the McCormicks divorced soon after their Lake Forest estate was complete, and they never occupied their opulent Italian villa. The estate remained in the possession of the McCormicks until the 1930s, when the house, along with its contents, was sold at auction for a fraction of their value.²⁵ The McCormicks’ and Armours’ unhappy marriages illustrate that while one could tame a lawn or decorate a villa with treasures, even the wealth of Lake Foresters could not achieve perfection, although they did not stop seeking it.

The McCormicks and Armours might not have been able to perfect their lives in Lake Forest, but others believed that their life in Lake Forest rivaled utopia. Meeker, who spent his summers in Lake Forest through his sixteenth year, refers to his childhood as “the Lake Forest years.”²⁶ Meeker recounts that Lake Forest was “our summer paradise...each spring we counted the days till we could get back; leaving in autumn, when school opened, annually broke our heart.”²⁷ Each year when it was time to leave for school in Chicago, Meeker expressed his jealousy of those who stayed behind in Lake Forest, “some of our friends, luckier than we, did not have to go, as they lived there all year round.”²⁸ Lake Forest had “enough to make any child happy.”²⁹ There was Indian corn so tall that the Meeker children could play hide-and-seek in it, and there were exotic animals that roamed Arcady, their estate, including a pair of buffalo.³⁰ For Arthur Meeker, the summers he spent in Lake Forest were his “halcyon days” and “the happiest time I ever knew.”³¹ For Meeker and other children, Lake Forest was perfect, or nearly so. But when he turned sixteen, Meeker’s restless family sold their estate and his halcyon days ended, for who, after all, “can hope to dwell in Arcady forever?”³²

Vincent Scully, author of the article “American Houses: Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright,” argues with vitriol that the estates constructed during the Progressive Era were nothing more than “the products of a blindly complacent and unduly favored minority.”³³ While the wealthy elite often acted in a way that benefited themselves and not society as a whole, they were hardly a complacent minority. The patriarch of the Meeker family, for example, “lost two fortunes and made three,” and while J Ogden Armour might have inherited his father’s business,

²³ Ibid., 95.

²⁴ Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 97.

²⁵ Michael H Ebner, *Creating Chicago’s North Shore* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 200.

²⁶ Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 93.

²⁷ Ibid., 83.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 90-91.

³⁰ Ibid., 90-91.

³¹ Ibid., 93, 101.

³² Ibid., 101.

³³ Vincent Scully, “American Houses: Thomas Jefferson to Frank Lloyd Wright,” in *The Rise of American Architecture*, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, Albert Fein, Winston Weisman, and Vincent Scully (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), 163.

he was the one who constructed Melody Farms in his pursuit of a utopian community.³⁴ The Lake Forest houses constructed in European styles reflected not only the residents' search for perfection, but also their willingness to intervene in their environment to create it.

Of course, there was a certain vanity to constructing houses that, as Meeker recalls, were so "oppressively huge when we were alone."³⁵ What, after all, is the point of a villa with forty-four rooms, except to show the world that you can afford to build one? And even Meeker, in response to spending summers roaming the Armour estate, wondered, "what was it *for*?—the paneled library of books that nobody read; the...music-room with its harp and organ and...grand pianos no-one knew how to play; the lake that wasn't fished; the horses that weren't ridden; the roses in the garden one hadn't time to smell!"³⁶ But while Scully condemns the building of such lavish estates, Meeker merely questions the point of constructing such a paradise if one does not enjoy it. Vanity, for Meeker, is not a sufficient reason for creating such a utopia. Wayne Andrews, author of *Architecture, Ambition, and Americans*, suggests as a counterpoint to both Scully and Meeker, that "perhaps we should stop scolding our grandfathers for spending money that was after all theirs to spend. Pageants have their place, and America without a palace would be as poor a thing as a parade without a banner."³⁷

Lake Foresters' attempts to create a perfect community, by controlling their environment and building structures that represented a romanticized Europe, led them to create a town center called Market Square, which was completed in 1916. Before Market Square was built, the business district was comprised of a hodge-podge of buildings with no uniformity.³⁸ Edward Arpee, in his book, *Lake Forest, Illinois: History and Reminiscences*, for which he collected the recollections of many Lake Foresters, states in harsher language that "the stores which had previously occupied the area were an eyesore, and the back lots had created slum conditions."³⁹ The most important words in that quote are "eyesore" and "slum conditions," since beauty was integral to Lake Foresters' vision of utopia. The hideous town center must have been a constant reminder of the outside world; it was something unpleasant in Lake Foresters' perfect world, so it became something that must be changed. Franz Schulze, Rosemary Cowler, and Arthur Miller also point out in their work, *30 Miles North*, that building Market Square showed Lake Forest's "desire to dress itself up," along with "its friendliness to the arts," as the locally renowned architect and Lake Forest resident, Howard Van Doren Shaw, was commissioned to design Market Square.⁴⁰

Building Market Square demonstrated not only Lake Foresters' desire to beautify their town but also the need to control their environment. Lake Foresters' desire to control their environment went further than just tearing down the old town center and building a new, more uniform one. The residents also designed Market Square around a modern commodity: the automobile.⁴¹ Market Square was the first town center in the country to be designed around the automobile, and it gave Lake Foresters more control over the town center, because they could determine where automobiles were allowed and where they were prohibited.⁴²

³⁴ Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, Jacket Flap, Warren Chappell.

³⁵ Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 75.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

³⁷ Wayne Andrews, *Architecture, Ambition, and Americans* (New York: The Free Press, 1969), 204.

³⁸ Coventry, Meyer, and Miller, *Classic Country Estates*, 186.

³⁹ Arpee, *History and Reminiscences*, 179.

⁴⁰ Schulze, Cowler, and Miller, *30 Miles North*, 95.

⁴¹ Coventry, Meyer, and Miller, *Classic Country Estates*, 26.

⁴² *Ibid.*

The building of Market Square also illustrated Lake Foresters' belief that a form of perfection lay in recreating an idealized version of Europe. Market Square was designed in an English country style, and even went so far as to incorporate the "traditional irregularity" of English villages.⁴³ This meant that the two towers that occupied opposite sides of the square were designed differently, with one possessing a sun dial and the other boasting a clock.⁴⁴ The reviews of the completed Market Square were overwhelmingly positive. Arpee recorded that the town center was "coordinated in cultivated taste and enduring beauty, making it one of the most attractive business centers in the country."⁴⁵ It seems that the only Lake Forester to find fault with Market Square was Arthur Meeker, who recounts with characteristic disdain that the town center "now boasts of a quaint-squinty square, lacking only a few strolling peasants in costume to look quite European."⁴⁶ While Meeker's view of Market Square is negative, it is significant because it reveals that Lake Foresters did manage to create a romanticized European town center that modeled their vision of perfection.

The building of Market Square, while stylistically derivative of Almerin Hotchkiss's 1857 design for Lake Forest, was definitely a deviation; however, it was not the first major departure from Hotchkiss's plan. The first digression from Hotchkiss's plan, according to *30 Miles North*, was the founding of the Onwentsia Club in 1896, which was an extension of the Lake Forest Golf Club.⁴⁷ The Onwentsia Club was in many ways European in origin, as many of the founders had lived abroad and had become enamored with the British sports of golf, polo, and the ever popular fox hunt.⁴⁸ These were the three main sports at Onwentsia, and Lake Foresters did not just dally in these sports, they became quite proficient. There were annual golf tournaments at Onwentsia, and its polo team had "the foremost rank in the west."⁴⁹ Clearly Lake Foresters took these British sports seriously. This means that when the residents of Lake Forest imitated Europe, they did not do it lightly or frivolously; they truly believed that to achieve perfection, it was necessary to imitate idyllic European customs. This is why they played British sports, built estates in European styles, and built Market Square to resemble a bucolic English town center.

It is also important to note that golf, polo, and foxhunting were all aristocratic in nature and were played only by the nobility and landed gentry in England. The residents of Lake Forest were not imitating the poor landless peasants of Europe but rather the wealthy landowners. The authors of *30 Miles North* comment on this phenomenon, explaining that in the Progressive Era there was a new "emphasis on the country life of a new landed gentry."⁵⁰ There was more to Lake Foresters' vision of Europe than grand houses and elite sports; they also wanted to imitate the seclusion of the landed European classes, who were very isolated in the country. But while

⁴³ Ibid., 186.

⁴⁴ Coventry, Meyer, and Miller, *Classic Country Estates*, 186. American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 9.

⁴⁵ Arpee, *History and Reminiscences*, 180.

⁴⁶ Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 84.

⁴⁷ Schulze, Cowler, and Miller, *30 Miles North*, 52. *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "Onwentsia Club and its handsome new home: it purchases the extensive estate of Henry Ives Cobb at Lake Forest," February 23, 1896, <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/> (accessed March 25, 2010).

⁴⁸ Coventry, Meyer, and Miller, *Classic Country Estates*, 67-8. Schulze, Cowler, and Miller, *30 Miles North*, 50.

⁴⁹ American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 99.

⁵⁰ Schulze, Cowler, and Miller, *30 Miles North*, 52.

the landed gentry in Europe would also have been isolated from each other on their estates, Lake Foresters chose to create an entire community that would be secluded from the outside world.

Onwentsia played an important role in this seclusion, because it allowed Lake Foresters to create their own exclusive social world. This social world, while based on European counterparts, was also distinctly American. In England, the famous social clubs such as White's and Boodle's were reserved exclusively for men, while Onwentsia was open to men, women, and children, albeit all of the same class. In fact, Arthur Meeker recalls the delights of having Saturday lunches in the "old, slightly derelict grey shingled building of my youth, with wide porches lined with rocking-chairs, and the dark timbered dining-room ruled by its despotic czarina."⁵¹ Women also participated fully at Onwentsia, as Madame X records in an article for the *Chicago Tribune*: "one of the most popular institutions... is the Wednesday luncheons for women golfers when they sit down fifty strong around a long table at the Onwentsia Club."⁵² While Lake Foresters sought to imitate a nostalgic image of old Europe in their club, they also had distinct ideas about what constituted the perfect American community. They sought to implement those ideas, even when the ideas diverged from one of the utopian models they were following.

The Onwentsia Club also brought a whole new type of people into the community: the summer residents. The summer residents were wealthy Chicagoans who rented or built homes in Lake Forest to take advantage of the countryside and its offerings, but wanted to remain close enough to Chicago for the men to go into their offices every day.⁵³ Even though Lake Forest was thirty miles north of Chicago, with the construction of a second set of railroad tracks, it had become possible to make the journey between Lake Forest and Chicago in under an hour and thus seemed the ideal commute.⁵⁴ Grace Farwell, who was a permanent resident of Lake Forest, recalls what "a curious combination they made... of busy men in the midst of making a big city, coming back each day to quiet Lake Forest and their families, and living as simple a life as could be lived in any New England Village."⁵⁵ Farwell's recollections of a "quiet Lake Forest," are from her childhood, when tranquility was an integral part of Lake Foresters' vision of utopia, before the advent of Onwentsia and the summer residents.

The new social whirl that surrounded the summer residents and Onwentsia replaced the old tranquility with gaiety. Before Onwentsia, Lake Forest was a more serene, pious town, which can be seen in a newspaper article that Grace Farwell recorded in her article, "Early Lake Forest": "the only entertainment that could be offered a young lady visitor during a stay of a week and a half, was four prayer-meetings, three missionary meetings and two church services. Let no one call Lake Forest gay."⁵⁶ The older residents of Lake Forest sought tranquility in their daily lives and believed that it was an essential part of utopia. With the advent of the summer

⁵¹ Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 93.

⁵² Madame X, "Events in Society Circles: memories of a gay Hanseling recalled to Summer wanderer," Events in Society Circles, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1912. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/> (accessed March 26, 2010).

⁵³ Meeker, *Chicago, With Love*, 86.

⁵⁴ John J. Halsey, *History of Lake County, Illinois, 1912* (Chicago: Harmegnies & Howell, 1912), 379-80.

⁵⁵ Mrs. Robert Greaves McGann is the married name of Grace Farwell. This paper will refer to Mrs. McGann as Grace Farwell because the Farwells were the more prominent family at the time in Lake Forest. Mrs. Robert Greaves McGann, "Early Lake Forest," in *Chicago Yesterdays: A Sheaf of Reminiscences*, ed. Caroline Kirkland (Chicago: Daughaday and Company, 1919), 240. <http://books.google.com/books?id=IpMUAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=chicago+yesterdays&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed April 18, 2010).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 253-54.

residents and Onwentsia, that search for tranquility was replaced by a search for gaiety. For example, the group of women who met every week for luncheon at Onwentsia was referred to as the “Lake Forest gay set.”⁵⁷ Gaiety implied something carefree and untroubled, which were attributes that Lake Forest residents wanted for their community. They did not want the outside cares and troubles to influence them, so an increased gaiety in Lake Forest society became part of their vision of utopia.

While the summer residents had a similar vision of utopia, they still built European houses and even helped design Market Square; they were used to a livelier town, as they were mostly from Chicago. And not all the permanent Lake Forest residents accepted the displacement of tranquility in favor of the gaiety that Onwentsia and the summer residents brought. Arthur Meeker, himself one of the summer people, recalls Grace Farwell lamenting that the “downfall of Lake Forest started when the first summer visitors appeared, in the Nineties.”⁵⁸ Farwell viewed them “not with alarm—for whom had she to fear?—but with weary disgust the disaster she conceived had overtaken her beloved village, invaded by well-heeled climbers from the wrong side of the tracks.”⁵⁹ Arthur Meeker’s recollections are incredibly believable, as Grace Farwell was still complaining about the summer residents in *Chicago Yesterdays*, which was published nearly twenty-five years after Onwentsia was founded. While it is clear that gaiety eventually won out over tranquility as a utopian ideal in Lake Forest, it is also evident that some of the permanent residents of Lake Forest resented the summer residents for years to come.

The advent of Onwentsia changed Lake Forest in a number of ways. The authors of *30 Miles North* asserted that Onwentsia “affected physical movement around the town as well as social mobility within it.”⁶⁰ It is clear that Onwentsia changed Lake Forest in the ways that the authors of *30 Miles North* suggest, as Greenbay Road, where Onwentsia was located, was quite undeveloped at the turn of the century but soon boasted numerous mansions. Also, the influx of summer residents was bound to change the social dynamics within Lake Forest. While the summer residents were also searching for a perfect community, one close to the city but far away from its ills, and one close enough to Chicago to make commuting relatively easy, their vision of utopia was slightly different from the permanent residents’ vision of perfection.⁶¹

Mary Cable, in her work *Top Drawer*, also notices a difference in post-Onwentsia Lake Forest. Cable claims that “the Onwentsia Club helped make a slick and plutocratic suburb out of what had been a simple country town by the shores of Lake Michigan.”⁶² This is an interesting claim, as Onwentsia did change Lake Forest, for it brought a more urbane social world to the exclusive town. However, Lake Forest was already an exclusive town that was ruled by the wealthy, and it had been since its inception in the mid-nineteenth century. Michael H. Ebner in *Creating Chicago’s North Shore*, confirms this view, stating that Lake Forest’s “tenor as a fashionable suburb was well established by the 1870s, some twenty years before the founding of Onwentsia.”⁶³ Also, an advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune* from 1895, the year before

⁵⁷ Madame X, “Events in Society Circles: memories of a gay Hanseling recalled to Summer wanderer,” Events in Society Circles, *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 14, 1912. <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/> (accessed March 26, 2010).

⁵⁸ Meeker, Chicago, With Love, 86.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁰ Schulze, Cowler, and Miller, *30 Miles North*, 52.

⁶¹ Halsey, History of Lake County, 380., American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 40.

⁶² Cable, *Top Drawer*, 54.

⁶³ Ebner, *Creating Chicago’s North Shore*, 77.

Onwentsia was founded, states that Lake Forest property is “the finest in any suburb of Chicago.”⁶⁴ This sentence is stated as fact in the advertisement, which implies that by the time Onwentsia was founded, everyone in Chicago and the surrounding areas already knew that Lake Forest was the most exclusive and fashionable suburb.

Grace Farwell’s article “Early Lake Forest,” also gives an interesting view of how Onwentsia changed the town. She recalls that “a later resident told me that she knew that Lake Forest only began to be fashionable at about the time she went there to live, when the Onwentsia Club was started.”⁶⁵ This resident’s view is in line with what Mary Cable claims, that Onwentsia changed Lake Forest from a country town into a fashionable suburb. Farwell continues, exclaiming, “How little she knew that we who had grown up there felt perfectly sure that the knell of dear, delightful, distinguished, exclusive, Lake Forest was at that moment sounded!”⁶⁶ Lake Forest had always been exclusive, but perhaps not fashionable before Onwentsia’s inception. Society within the town became much more varied after Onwentsia was founded and the summer residents arrived. One could even argue that Onwentsia made Lake Forest less exclusive because more people, even if they were of the same class, were now frequenting Lake Forest and changing Lake Forest with their view of utopia.

The summer residents were accepted in Lake Forest, albeit grudgingly by some; however, people from outside the wealthy elite were very unwelcome to step within the bounds of the sanctuary that was Lake Forest. An intriguing incident in August of 1927 demonstrates this quite well. Lake Forest possesses some of the finest lakefront on the North Shore, and Chicagoans would drive to Lake Forest and park along the roadways near Lake Michigan. According to an article in the *Chicago Tribune*, the interlopers made “a practice of changing their clothes in the machines to go swimming” and leaving “banana skins and other picnic refuse...dumped over on the estate lawns.”⁶⁷ On one particular day in the summer of 1927, two hundred of these picnickers were arrested for “parking their automobiles in prohibited areas near the estates of several wealthy residents of the village.”⁶⁸ All of the picnickers were taken to the police station but were not charged and instead were just released with a warning.⁶⁹ While Lake Forest might have had few fences to interfere with its “park-like” atmosphere, the arrest of two hundred picnickers clearly demonstrates the lengths Lake Foresters would go to keep the “rabble” out of Lake Forest, and as the unwelcome picnickers soon learned, not all fences were physical.⁷⁰ The use of the police was just one way that Lake Foresters prevented undesirables from entering their territory and jeopardizing their continuing search for utopia.

Lake Foresters were trying to keep their town secluded from the outside world, which implies that they were trying to escape from something. What was it about the world outside their community, specifically Chicago, that Lake Forest residents were trying to escape? One of the many things that Lake Foresters were fleeing from was the dirt, pollution, and overcrowding in the city of Chicago. The *Gem of the Prairie*, in an article about Chicago from the mid-nineteenth century records, “Many of the populous localities are noisome quagmires, the gutters

⁶⁴ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Classified Ad 16 -- No Title” March 17, 1895, <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/> (accessed March 27, 2010).

⁶⁵ Mrs. Robert Greaves McGann, “Early Lake Forest,” 256.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Lake Forest police arrest 200 Picnickers parking near estates,” August 8, 1927, <http://www.proquest.com.proxy.iwu.edu/> (accessed March 26, 2010).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 103.

running with filth at which the very swine turn up their noses in supreme disgust.”⁷¹ The filth, smell, and unsightliness of Chicago would have been intolerable for people who saw beauty as an integral part of utopia. For Lake Foresters, beauty was more than something that was aesthetically pleasing; it was also clean, isolated, and unpolluted. While this article is from the mid-nineteenth century, Lake Foresters in the Progressive Era had the same concerns. For example, Grace Farwell records in her article “Early Lake Forest,” an article from the *Lake Forest Reporter* which states that Lake Forest was “elevated more than a hundred feet about water-level, with a bold, clean shore where no miasma can find a lurking place.”⁷² This article’s preoccupation with pointing out how clean and unpolluted Lake Forest was implies that Lake Foresters were trying to escape from the pollution and filth that plagued the city of Chicago. The article also mentions that the estates in Lake Forest were “laid out in generous lots,”⁷³ which shows that the residents of Lake Forest were also trying to distance themselves from the multitudes of people in Chicago. The American Communities Company in their book on Lake Forest also mentions that the estates “give a sense of freedom which takes one far from the cramped environment of a city.”⁷⁴ Space was clearly something that Lake Foresters were searching for when they built estates on such large plots of land.

Lake Foresters were also trying to escape from the disease that plagued the city of Chicago because of the poor sanitary conditions. For example, there were numerous cholera outbreaks throughout the nineteenth century in Chicago.⁷⁵ Mrs. Joseph Frederick Ward, who lived in Chicago as a child, recalls that “in the cholera year I watched eight funerals in one afternoon in half a square. It was a dreadful time. Everyone left the city who could.”⁷⁶ Cholera and other diseases were a major problem in every large city. Disease was especially rampant during the summer months, which is why so many people began to retreat to the country. The permanent residents and summer residents of Lake Forest would have been trying to escape from disease, along with other ills associated with crowded city conditions, by secluding themselves. For Lake Foresters, perfection could only be obtained in an environment that was as free from disease as possible, and free from pollution, dirt, and overcrowding. Such an environment would be safe as well as beautiful, and in keeping with their vision of utopia.

Thus, during the Progressive Era, Lake Foresters sought to create the perfect town. This search is illustrated by the romanticized architecture they chose for their manors, the design and construction of idyllic Market Square, the social world they created, and their efforts to distance themselves from the ills of life in the city. Lake Foresters’ vision of utopia revolved around an idealized Europe, as well as the search for beauty, tranquility, control, and gaiety. The residents of Lake Forest tried throughout the Progressive Era to implement these components in various ways, from building European-style mansions to creating a social whirlwind around the

⁷¹ Libby Hill, *The Chicago River: A Natural and Unnatural History*, (Lake Claremont Press, 2000), 98.<http://books.google.com/books?id=Nmfnd14WDH8C&printsec=frontcover&dq=libby+hill&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false> (accessed April 18, 2010).

⁷² Mrs. Robert Greaves McGann, “Early Lake Forest,” 254-255.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 255.

⁷⁴ American Communities Company, *Lake Forest*, 40.

⁷⁵ Libby Hill, *The Chicago River*, 97-98.

⁷⁶ Mrs. Joseph Frederick Ward, “As I Remember It,” in *Chicago Yesterdays: A Sheaf of Reminiscences*, ed. Caroline Kirkland (Chicago: Daughaday and Company, 1919), 94.
<http://books.google.com/books?id=IpMUAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=chicago+yesterdays&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false> (Accessed April 18, 2010).

Onwentsia Club. Lake Foresters also struggled to keep the ills that plagued the city of Chicago, such as pollution, and disease, and unwanted visitors, away their community. Lake Forest was a small elite community with vast plans and residents with complete faith in their ability to attain perfection during the Progressive Era. Lake Foresters were a unique amalgam of European and American, of tranquility and gaiety, and of busy men playing at being idle. The residents of Lake Forest left a lasting impact on their community, in the same way that the progressives as a whole left their mark on America.