

# Flossmoor History Before 1924



# **Author's Note**

This work was first presented in 2021 as part of a temporary display in the library building. It has been reformatted and lightly updated for presentation on the library's website for the village's centennial celebration in 2024.

Although I have endeavored to provide accurate factual information, there is always a chance of slight error in a document like this. If the reader should note any errors or omissions, please submit them to [flossref@flossmoorlibrary.org](mailto:flossref@flossmoorlibrary.org) and we may update this document at a future date.

Finally, this work would be impossible without the work of local historians who have written about Flossmoor over the previous decades. Their works are listed on the final page of this document. I am eternally grateful for their efforts.

*David Martin  
Head of Adult Services  
Flossmoor Public Library  
February 2024*

## PART ONE: THE LEGACY OF THE BISON

Imagine, for a moment, a herd of hundreds of bison moving through Flossmoor. Not only did this happen, it was a regular occurrence year after year for centuries, and this natural migratory behavior directly influenced the development of Flossmoor and built a “highway” you might drive on every day.

The bison, sometimes referred to as buffalo, had a population of several thousand in the land that would become Illinois from at least 6000 years ago until the last wild bison was killed circa 1808. Winter was hard on the northern Illinois prairie, so every fall these bison would migrate to warmer climates in northern Kentucky, returning north in the spring.

As bison were physically large and traveled in packs, their beating hoofs trampled down the vegetation over the years to create, essentially, a permanent thoroughfare that was over twenty feet wide in places. Bison avoided deep river crossings and used the natural contours of the land to travel safely. The path that they wore down proved useful to humans in the area. It was first used by native tribes like the Miami, Sauk, Kickapoo, and Potawatomi to move from place to place. Later, when the French were settling in areas along the present Illinois/Indiana border, they used the ancient buffalo trail to travel from the older trading post in Vincennes, Indiana (settled in 1732) to the newer town of Chicago (settled in the 1780s). At that point in time it was named Vincennes Trace or Vincennes Trail.

In Flossmoor, the Vincennes Trail followed the same path that Dixie Highway does today. It makes sense, then, that the earliest European settlers made their homes along this road. However, due to geopolitical events like the American Revolution and the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, the French influence in the region had dissipated, and the first permanent European settlers in Flossmoor were mostly farmers of English or German descent.



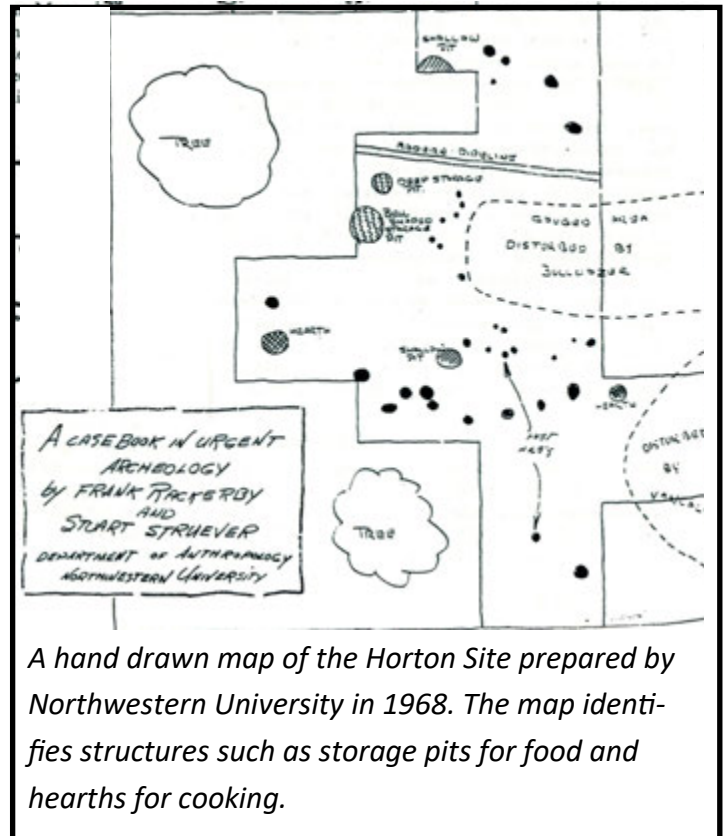
*In recent years, small herds of bison have been reintroduced to the Illinois landscape, such as this group at Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie near Joliet. Photo courtesy of The National Forest Service.*

## PART TWO: NATIVE AMERICANS IN THE FLOSSMOOR AREA

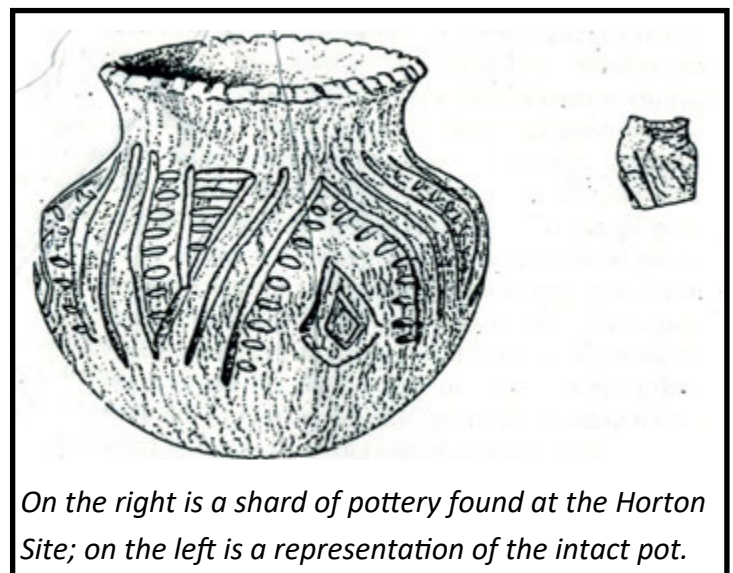
For two summers in the late 1960s, The Field Museum and the anthropology department at Northwestern University conducted archaeological surveys in a small meadow near where Western Avenue crosses Butterfield Creek. The area was undergoing development with new homes being built; during construction, workers turned up some evidence of Native American habitation that was worthy of study. The Horton Site, named after an early family that lived on the property, revealed several thousand shards of pottery, stone artifacts, animal bones, and the remains of a large building.

The anthropologists studying the Horton Site believed it was a seasonal hunting camp founded sometime between 1150 and 1400 AD. It is believed that a small group of people spent the fall and winter months at this location. It is possible that they spent the rest of the year near modern-day Thornton, where there was a village consisting of nearly 2,000 residents at this time. There was a small foot trail leading from that village to the Vincennes Trail, which then passed near the Horton Site.

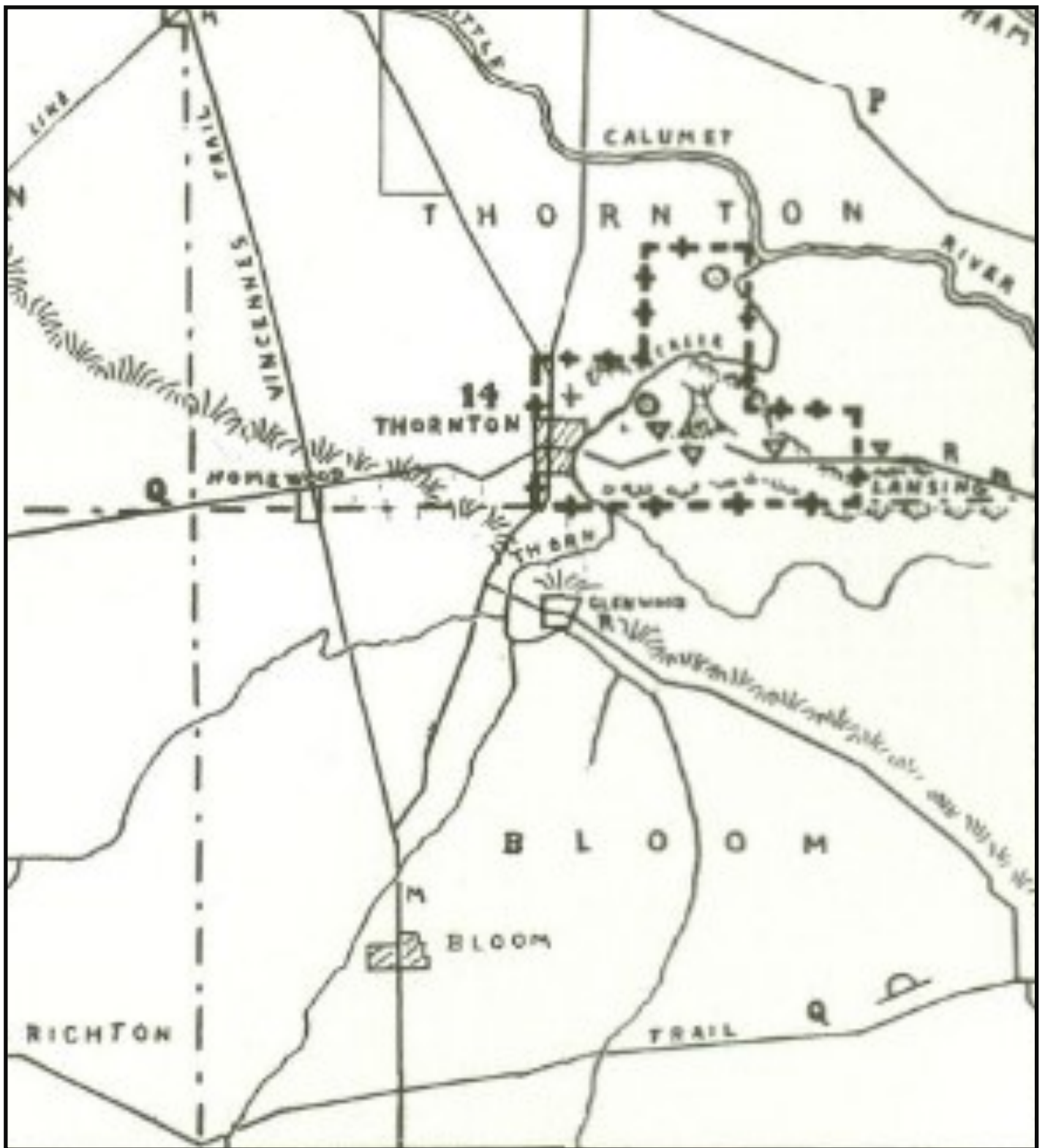
It is likely that the Horton Site was just one of several locations in Flossmoor that housed Native Americans at various points in time. However, comprehensive archaeological surveys of the area were limited during European settlement, and much has been lost to history.



*A hand drawn map of the Horton Site prepared by Northwestern University in 1968. The map identifies structures such as storage pits for food and hearths for cooking.*



*On the right is a shard of pottery found at the Horton Site; on the left is a representation of the intact pot.*



In 1901, cartographer Albert Scharf created a map that overlaid Native American trails and villages onto contemporary towns in Chicagoland. In this section of that map, we see the Vincennes Trail (now Dixie Highway) passing from Homewood to Bloom (now called Chicago Heights). Although not labeled, Flossmoor would be in between those two communities, where Scharf drew Butterfield Creek crossing the trail. The Native American village near Thornton is also represented. This village had almost 2,000 residents in the year 1400.

## **PART THREE: THE FARMS OF FUTURE FLOSSMOOR**

Between 1790 and 1835, through a series of skirmishes and one-sided treaties, Native Americans were pushed out of Illinois into lands west of the Mississippi River. This, along with the departure of the French, enabled Yankees and newly emigrated Europeans to flood into northeastern Illinois and led to the development of Chicago as a major trading outpost and transportation hub.

Illinois land was known for its fertile black soil and ease of growing profitable crops, and proximity to the markets of Chicago made the Flossmoor area attractive to early farmers. The first known white settler in the area was New York-born Benjamin Butterfield, who bought 240 acres of land along the creek that now bears his name in 1834. Butterfield farmed the land and also operated a tavern along Vincennes Trail. In 1850, Butterfield donated some of his land to build the first school, which was called Butterfield School. This one-room country schoolhouse was the first educational facility in Flossmoor. In the mid-1850s, Butterfield sold off all his holdings and moved to Iowa, where he died at the age of 83 in 1883.

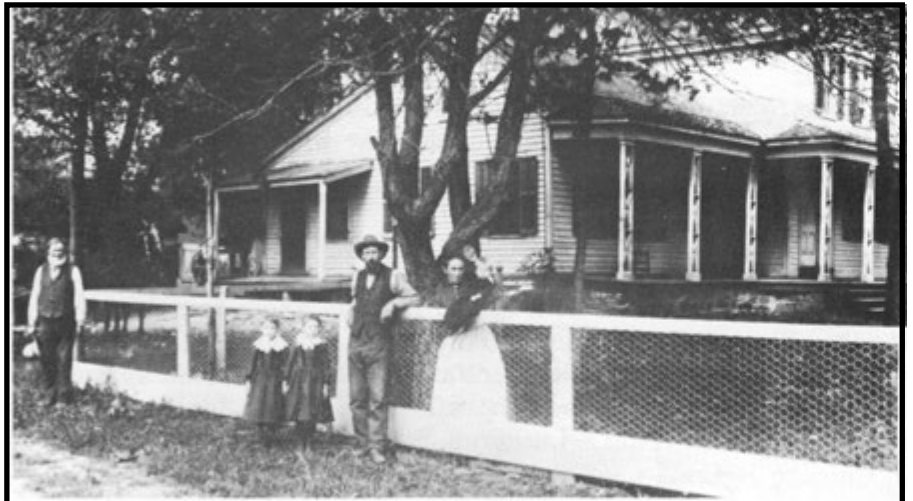
In the 1840s, German settlers who were fleeing political turmoil in their homeland began arriving in the area. One of the first to arrive was Conrad Hecht, who bought 40 acres formerly belonging to Benjamin Butterfield in 1851. His home still stands today at 18916 Dixie Highway. In the years before train service, Conrad would drive a wagon full of goods to Chicago. He would usually leave the farm after evening supper, driving all night to make the morning markets which were in Chicago's Woodlawn neighborhood. The Hecht family farm eventually grew to 300 acres and stayed in the family for generations. Conrad's grandson, Albert Hecht, opened the first grocery store in downtown Flossmoor in 1928.

Another early family who arrived in the 1850s was that of Dr. William Doepp. Dr. Doepp was the first doctor in the H-F area. The Doepp farm was on Butterfield Creek east of Western Avenue. The doctor maintained an office at the homestead but spent most of his time traveling on horseback to provide house calls to the early pioneers.

Other early farmers in the Flossmoor area included the Vollmer family, who had 130 acres at what is now the corner of Western Avenue and Vollmer Road, the Stelter Family at Dixie Highway and Holbrook Road, the Vanderwalkers, who lived near the small lane that bears their name today, and the Nietfeldt family, whose farm was near where H-F High School sits today.



*Benjamin Butterfield, the first white settler of the Flossmoor area, arrived in 1838 and left in 1855 for Iowa. He died at the age of 83 in 1883.*



*The Hecht Family moved into this home in 1851 and stayed until 1972. The home still stands, in a modified and expanded form, on Dixie Highway. Picture circa 1890.*



*This was the home and office of Dr. William Doepp on Vollmer Avenue. The doctor would see patients here but also made house calls on horseback.*

## PART FOUR: THE RAILROAD AND GOLF

Although early farms were successful, Flossmoor was not destined to remain agricultural forever. The Illinois Central Railroad (IC) and the game of golf combined to bring the next stage in the development of Flossmoor.

The railroad passed through Flossmoor starting in the 1850s but originally only had a depot in Homewood (then called Thornton Junction, after the depot's name) and skipped past the Flossmoor region—unless a passenger requested a stop at “Doctor's Crossing,” an unofficial stop near the home of pioneer Dr. Doepp. In 1891, the IC bought 160 acres of land north of Flossmoor Road (then called Illinois Street) and west of Western Avenue, on both sides of their existing tracks. Initial plans for this purchase were to strip the land of topsoil to use at the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, but that plan fell through and the land lay dormant for almost a decade.

In 1898, a group of wealthy businessmen in Chicago decided that a country club should be situated somewhere along the IC tracks. Golf and other forms of outdoor recreation were exploding in popularity among the upper class at this time, and fresh country air and idyllic retreats like Flossmoor were seen as healthy escapes from the noisy and polluted city. Various outings to scout locations were held, and the men employed German-speaking real estate agents to buy up the land that became Flossmoor Country Club but initially opened under the name Homewood Country Club.

The first clubhouse at the course opened in 1900. The club experienced solid growth in membership but bad luck when it came to fires. The clubhouse burned in 1904. The replacement clubhouse burned down in 1914. Finally, in 1917 the current clubhouse was built. At this time, the club was renamed Flossmoor Country Club after the train station that had opened a couple blocks west.

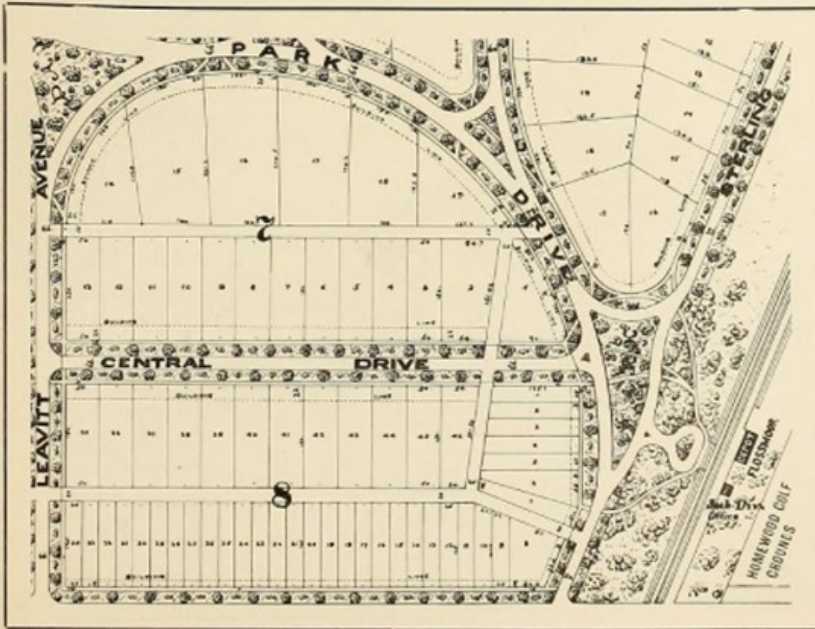
As golf grew in the area, the railroad saw great value in building a new passenger depot and subdividing the 160 acres they owned for residential use. The IC ran a contest to determine a new name for the area and the word Flossmoor was chosen, combining two ancient Scottish terms meaning “dew on the heather” and “gently rolling countryside.” In 1901, the IC registered a subdivision plat and began selling lots. They built six houses in the neighborhood for prospective buyers to tour. These “original six” homes mostly ended up in the hands of railroad executives. There still was no central commercial district and many people did not live in Flossmoor year-round but instead built summer cottages and weekend retreats. The two areas of development at this time were “Old Flossmoor,” northwest of the depot, and Braeburn-Brassie, close to the country club.





Section of  
**Illinois Central Sub-Division  
at Flossmoor**

25 MILES FROM CHICAGO ON ILLINOIS CENTRAL SUBURBAN LINE



South of and Adjoining

**Homewood  
Country Club Grounds**

See the above model sub-division  
before purchasing elsewhere.  
F. H. BARRY, Sales Agent,  
608 Reaper Building, Chicago.

**FREQUENT and QUICK  
SUBURBAN TRAINS**

*An advertisement produced by the Illinois Central Railroad to entice homebuyers to their new subdivision. Lots were laid out west of the tracks between Flossmoor Road and Wallace Street, and six "model homes" were built for tours.*



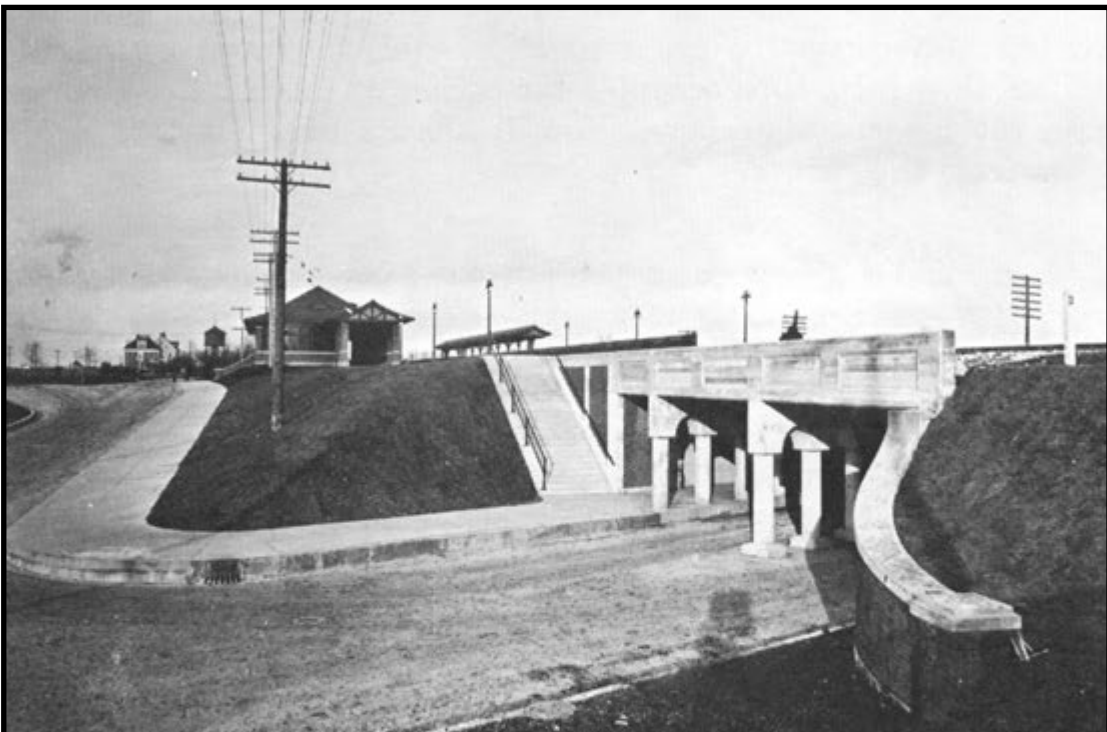
*This home on Sterling Avenue was one of the "Original Six" homes built in Flossmoor by the Illinois Central Railroad.*



*A close-up of the original Flossmoor depot from 1904, on the east side of the tracks.*



*This view from 1907 of Flossmoor Road crossing the ICRR bears little resemblance to the downtown Flossmoor we know today. Crossing was done at grade, the original station is seen on the east side of the track, and the surrounding land has a very rural look, devoid of major buildings.*



*Seven years later, this 1914 view is more recognizable. The viaduct has been built, the current station has been built on the west side of the tracks, and houses are visible in the distance.*



Most of the best golfers of the early 20th Century competed at Flossmoor Country Club, and the growing town named new streets after several of them: Bob Gardner, Dexter Cummings, and Chick Evans, all pictured here, as well as Harry Vardon, Walter Hagen, Max Marston, Jock Hutchison, Jerome Travers, Robert MacDonald, and women's champion Glenna Collett. Other golf-inspired street names in town include Bunker, Brassie, and Caddy.

## PART FIVE: IDLEWILD AND OTHER AREA COUNTRY CLUBS

The founders of the Flossmoor Country Club weren't the only people eyeing the Illinois Central Railroad as an avenue for developing golf courses. Soon there were several courses in the area: Ravisloe (1901) and Calumet (relocated from Chicago in 1917) in Homewood, The Chicago Heights Country Club (1912), Olympia Fields Country Club (1915), Flossmoor's own Idlewild (1908) and, later, Cherry Hills Country Club (1928—now Coyote Run).

Like much of American life in the early 20th Century, golf grew as a segregated activity. Unmarried women, African-Americans, Catholics and Jews all found themselves unwelcome in some form or another at established clubs. Wealthy Jewish businessmen, already accustomed to this exclusion in other aspects of their lives, were quick to form their own country club destinations. Idlewild and Ravisloe both opened as predominantly Jewish country clubs.

Idlewild Country Club began in 1908 under the efforts of Fred Newman (who became Idlewild's first president), Julius Rosenwald, Albert Loeb, Leo Steele, Ed Wedles, Sidney Mandle, and others.

The founding of Idlewild likely represents the beginning of the presence of Jewish culture in the Flossmoor area—a presence that would only grow over the course of the century. Similar to the Flossmoor Country Club, summer homes and cottages were built for Jewish businessmen and their families around the Holbrook area in this early era. In later decades, Jewish people moved into the area year-round and synagogues were formed.

Mr. and Mrs. Adolph Linick and family, of the Chicago Beach Hotel, anticipating the approach of an early Spring, have opened their Flossmoor country estate, which is one of the show places of the South Shore.

*The Society page of The Jewish Sentinel, a weekly Chicago publication, reported the activities of several early Jewish people in Flossmoor. Adolph Linick's estate was at Holbrook and Dixie Highway, across the street from Idlewild Country Club. This excerpt is from 1923.*



*The current clubhouse at Idlewild.*

## PART SIX: OTHER DEVELOPMENTS FROM 1900-1924

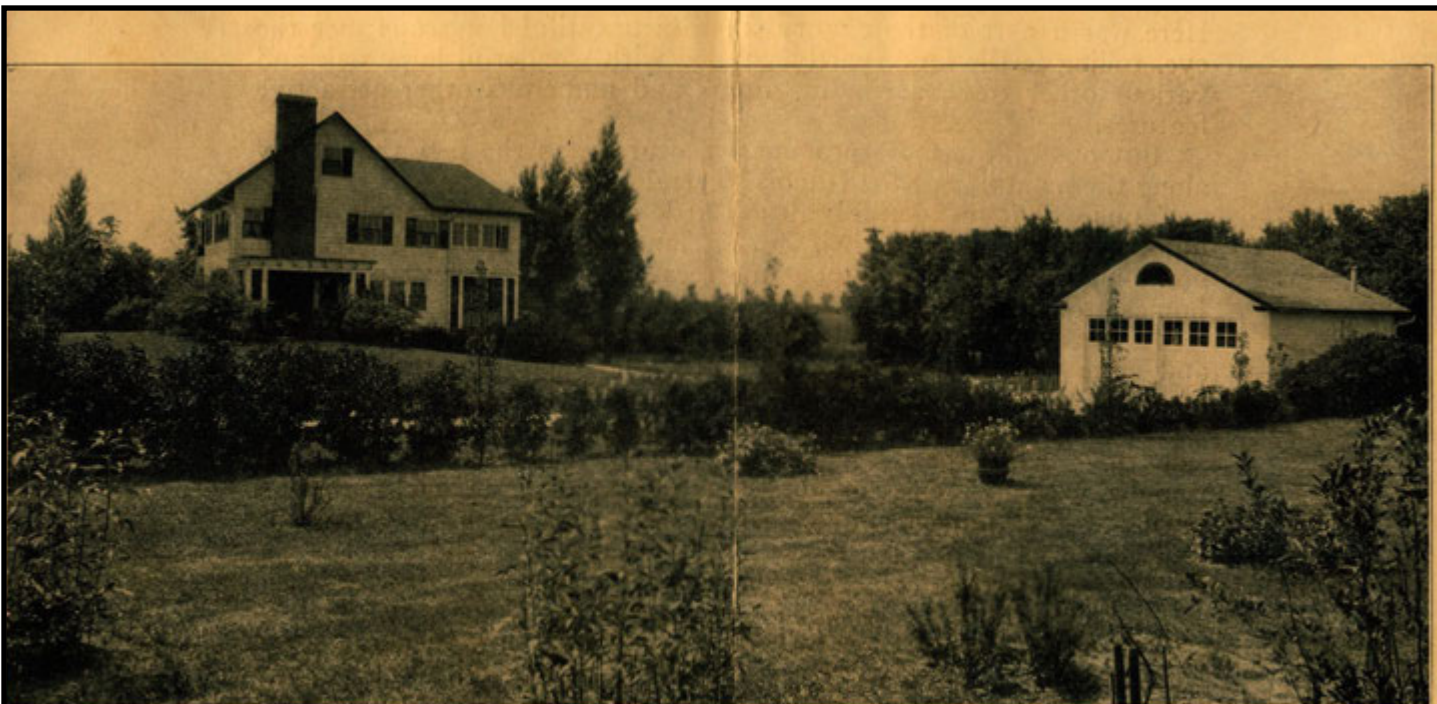
In 1916, road crews in Flossmoor worked on widening and paving what had been known as Vincennes Trail but was being rebranded as Dixie Highway. Dixie Highway was the vision of Indiana native Carl G. Fisher, who had worked on the coast-to-coast Lincoln Highway a couple years prior. As the Lincoln Highway connected east and west, Fisher wanted a road similar in scope and design to connect the north and the south. Fisher plotted a route from Chicago to Miami using existing roads and trails. Most of these were unimproved and Fisher began a monumental campaign to get every mile of the route paved. By 1920, Flossmoor residents had a high quality road to take them to sunny Florida.



At the same time the Dixie Highway was being developed, a less well-remembered trail was developed that connected Chicago with Cairo, IL at the state's southern tip. Known as The Egyptian Trail, it originally entered Flossmoor from the north on Dixie Highway, then headed west on Flossmoor Road and took Western Avenue south out of town. The Egyptian Trail was later routed onto Governors' Highway. This mostly forgotten motor trail was considered a success for linking urban Chicago with rural areas downstate.

Originally, Flossmoor children went to two "country schools" with single rooms—the Stelter School (formerly known as the Butterfield School) on Dixie Highway, and another school on Kedzie Avenue near where H-F High School is now. The first "modern" multi-room schoolhouse for the community was Leavitt Avenue School, which opened in 1923. This building contained two classrooms and a full basement at opening. It would later be expanded in the late 1930s. Fifteen children attended class the first year.

As the area was still unincorporated, public services, including policing, were lacking. The landowners of the Braeburn-Brassie area, many of whom were still part-time residents, took to pooling their funds for a private watchman to patrol the neighborhood. The desire to improve public services led to incorporation in 1924.



## FLOSSMOOR—*the Beautiful*

**F**LOSSMOOR is located in the southern part of Cook County, Illinois, on the main line of the Illinois Central Railroad, twenty-four miles from Chicago's loop, the heart of the business district.

The Illinois Central suburban transportation to FLOSSMOOR is considered the finest suburban transportation in Chicago. At this time there are seventy-three (73) suburban trains stopping at FLOSSMOOR daily. FLOSSMOOR will not be obliged to wait and wait on a promise of good transportation as FLOSSMOOR has it now. The newspapers have been full of the news of the Illinois Central's proposed electrification of their system from Chicago to beyond FLOSSMOOR and the equipment for this wonderful improvement is now arriving and is being put into service. They are spending \$40,000,000 on their Chicago Terminal and in the Summer of 1926 expect to have electric trains in operation on a schedule of about thirty minutes from Randolph Street station to FLOSSMOOR with all new steel equipment.

Practically all grade crossings have been eliminated.

You can leave FLOSSMOOR on any one of the many suburban trains and ride in comfort to the heart of Chicago, arriving at any one of the three prominent stations, Twelfth Street, Van Buren Street or Randolph Street stations, within walking distance of all loop theatres, business houses, clubs, etc. You can return to FLOSSMOOR at almost any time you desire, day or night.

FLOSSMOOR's paved streets and roads lead in every direction to wonderful automobile drives, to many surrounding towns and communities and to one of the most prominent national highways, the DIXIE HIGHWAY. It is only a short drive by automobile over good roads into Chicago.

FLOSSMOOR is not a dream of the future, but it is a well established community. The restrictions on practically all of the property appeal to the better class of people and as a result the entire district is peopled with the best. FLOSSMOOR restrictions will protect her in the future, so we are sure of the entire district being populated with nothing but high class families who want to be away from communities filled with undesirables and who also want to be away from mills and factories, for FLOSSMOOR has none of these and never expects to have any.

FLOSSMOOR has a good school which will be enlarged as the demand warrants. You will find churches of almost every denomination in the vicinity of FLOSSMOOR.

FLOSSMOOR has telephones, electric lights, and is modern in every respect. Practically all the big city stores make daily deliveries, so you really have all the advantages of the big city plus fresh air, good climate, beautiful scenery and high class neighbors, away from the dust and dirt and noise.

Life is worth living at FLOSSMOOR and your children can be raised in a community where you can give them all the advantages of proper environment.

FLOSSMOOR being located back amongst the hills and away from the dampness of the lake has an ideal climate particularly suitable for those who are troubled with bronchial, catarrh, sinus and rheumatic troubles and for this reason might be termed a Health Resort, it being one of the highest spots in the county and an ideal place to build your home and locate your family.

*Another early advertisement, circa 1924—1926, to lure homebuyers to the new village of Flossmoor.*

*Marketing in this era was aimed squarely at elite wealthy professionals who needed a quick commute to downtown Chicago but had grown weary of urban living. This ad expresses those feelings using terminology that would be considered offensive in the more inclusive Flossmoor that exists today.*

## WORKS USED

Three major works volumes of Flossmoor history have been published over the years. They are:

Adair, Anna B., and Sandberg, Adele. *Indian Trails to Tollways: The Story of the Homewood-Flossmoor Area*. Fremouw Press, 1968

*Kabbes, Elise D., and GiaQuinta, Mary. Images of America: Flossmoor, Illinois*. Arcadia Publishing, 1999.

Wagner, Susan F. *A History of the Village of Flossmoor 1851—1974*. Flossmoor Historical Committee, 1974.

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In addition to the above works, the following articles, websites and resources were consulted:

Bulletin of the Field Museum of Natural History, March 1968. In Flossmoor Library's Historical Collection.

Hayes, Jack. "Flossmoor Has Golf in its Roots." Chicago Tribune, 14 October 1987.

Mehaffey, Scott. "Local History: The Origins of Flossmoor." H-F Chronicle. 30 March 2018.

Sulski, Jim. "Showing the Way." Chicago Tribune, 18 December 1997.

Swatek, Bonnie J. *The History of School District 161 1860-1928*. July 1989.

*The Tradition Endures: Flossmoor Country Club 1899-1999*. Flossmoor Country Club, 1999.

"Vincennes Trace." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 12 January 2021, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincennes\\_Trace](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vincennes_Trace)

Wright, James. *Images of America: The Dixie Highway in Illinois*. Arcadia Press, 2009.

Wright, James. "Chicago to Cairo, along the Egyptian Trail: Trail Celebrates its Centennial in 2015." H-F Chronicle. 20 June 2015.

Various newspaper clippings and handwritten remembrances in the collection of the Flossmoor Public Library Historical Archives