CHAPTER 3

NILES TOWNSHIP

As Chicago and other areas in northeastern Illinois continued to attract permanent settlers, Cook County commissioners called for an election of officers for Niles Township. On April 2, 1850, reports T. A. Andreas in his history of Cook County, the first meeting for this purpose convened at the North Branch Hotel at Dutchman's Point. Older settlers, writes Andreas, selected the name "Niles" at a public meeting "held some time previous to this first election."

Samuel E. Ferris was chosen moderator for this meeting and then elected supervisor for the township. Although Ferris did not live, as far as is known, in any area of present-day Niles, the Niles Historical Museum has the original land grant transfer signed by President Zachary Taylor which established Ferris' homestead in Niles Township.

Numerous officials were elected for the township: supervisor, clerk, collector, overseer of the poor, three commissioners of highways, two justices of the peace, and two constables. Christian Ebinger was elected assessor and overseer of the poor. In future elections conducted annually, Ebinger would be chosen for numerous other positions.

A decision was made to establish a pound and $150 was voted for that purpose. Andreas writes, "it was resolved that no swine should run at large."

For the year ending April 1, 1851, $219.44 was collected; $63.11 was set aside for road purposes and $156.33 for use by the township. Highway improvement was the most pressing issue. Later that year at a meeting in June, a vote was taken to raise $200 by tax for the improvement of roads.

Not all settlers had the same degree of permanency as did the Ebingers. Ray Steil, who is a direct descendant of one of the pioneer families who settled in the Niles area and still lives in Niles, is an avid collector of historical documents and memorabilia. In his possession are abstracts and examinations of titles for land bounded by today's Golf Road, Greenwood Road, Church Street, and Washington Street. This area includes the Golf-Mill shopping center.

In this area, Eben Conant was shown to be an original owner of some 160 acres purchased from the United States in 1843. He sold this parcel to William Clark in 1847 for $200, adding to Clark's holdings of 80 acres purchased in 1844 for $320 from the Governor of Illinois.

In 1846 William Clark sold 40 acres to Henry Holmes and William H. Mawry, the area of today's St. Isaac Jogues Church and grounds. No money was involved in this curious transaction which called for Clark to secure payment of $150 in good merchantable sheep and 150 lbs. of wool for five successive years. The sheep business apparently did not provide the necessary payment and Clark got the land back, before the five years passed, for a payment of $150. No documentation was recorded as to how many sheep or how much wool Clark received in the three years before ownership was again transferred to him.

One Joshua Brookes "of the City of N.Y." purchased some 200 acres in 1858 for $200 only to have his heirs sell it back to the original owner, John W. Wood, in 1863. Wood would sell it for $1,500 the same year to Ludwig Geistfeld, who would resell it to Wood in 1867.
During these transactions, Wood sold, in 1865, one-half acre along Milwaukee Avenue to the school trustees and "their successors in office." The sale price was $25.

John Steil, Ray Steil's grandfather, became a property owner in 1873 purchasing 20 acres from Herman Schwinge for $1,200.

All the land transfers described above, although in present-day Niles, were in other municipalities at various times. As Ray Steil likes to mention, "I've had five different mailing addresses and I've lived in the same house all my life." The land on which Golf-Mill shopping center is currently located was in Park Ridge in 1875. A large detailed map of Cook County in 1875, measuring approximately 10 feet by 10 feet, can be viewed at the Northbrook Historical Society. The map, published by Van Vechten and Snyder's, shows exact boundaries of homesteads along with owners.

Alex Brown was shown as the owner of some 200 acres along Milwaukee Avenue in Maine Township. J. Egan owned some 120 acres.

The original settlement of Niles, at Waukegan, Milwaukee, and Touhy, is shown in detail. Going North on Waukegan from Milwaukee the homesteads were shown as Suhn, West, Hoffman, Winters, Lupton, Wood, and Mrs. Whittington with 23 acres. The largest landowners in the immediate area were Wm. Clark (98 acres), L. Hall (100 acres), J. Rutland (54 acres), and R. Day (46 acres).

The Ebinger name appears frequently in several subdivided areas and a specific subdivision is indicated with half in present-day Niles and the other half in Norwood Park. Other owners of smaller parcels are listed as H. Toms and W. Kobb.

A. J. Snell is listed for the property and hotel on today's Harlem Avenue north of Touhy. The classified ads for Niles, found alongside this large map, mention the Farmer's House (M. Mathis, proprietor) and the Niles Hotel (Joseph Toefter, proprietor) but do not indicate exact locations on the map. Other listings for Niles are: Brick Manufacturer, Thorsen, Peter; Groceries and Provi-
Fragmentary information is available on specific businessmen and professionals in Niles during the late 19th century. Theodore Hoffman, M.D., who lived on Waukegan Road as noted above, was born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1820. He was educated at Heidelberg and took postgraduate courses at Rush Medical College after his arrival in America. He regularly visited patients as far away as Elk Grove, Libertyville, Lake Forest, Wheeling, Des Plaines, and Norwood Park.

Dr. Hoffman regularly would travel on horseback. After losing his way several times, he began carrying a compass and a lantern. A story is told about the good doctor losing his way in a forest when he saw a cabin. After arousing the occupants, he was let in. Mrs. Nellie Whittington of Niles continues the story, “he threw himself on a pile of shavings in the corner, glad of a shelter. In the morning they cooked potatoes and hand bread, no butter or anything else to go with it, and gladly shared their meager store with him. Such was the pioneer spirit of the people who founded Niles.”

Often he would be away for two weeks at a time. As he went greater distances, the roads became more difficult to travel. His one-horse cart could not manage the ruts, so he got another horse.

The doctor kept quite accurate records of his patients. This ledger was preserved at the Des Plaines Historical Society and was compiled for publication by Ruth Blietz. It has been called “a virtual census of the residents of the area during the Civil War years…When he didn’t know the name of a patient, he sometimes referred to them by the location of their farm, by their relationship to someone he did know, or by their physical appearance.”

Dr. Hoffman came to the area in 1848 and settled in Niles in 1849 where he practiced medicine until 1868. He then left for Chicago. After the Chicago fire, which burned his office and four houses he owned, he returned to Niles and continued his practice until 1905 when he died in his home.

John S. Niemann arrived in Niles in 1870 from Denmark. After working in Peter Thorsen’s brickyard, he purchased a store and a saloon, later to be called Niemann’s Hall.

Mabel Warnke has written several books which make numerous references to the early history of Niles. Warnke described the Beto family grocery store as being the only one in Niles for many years. Built in 1874, it started out as an inn and a saloon and was called the Welcome Inn.

Xavery Wójcikiewicz settled in Niles around 1896. He became a prominent florist serving the wholesale trade in Chicago. He was also the official grave decorator for St. Adalbert’s Cemetery.
E. Palma Baudette writes in *Niles Township* that in 1884 Niles had "two stores, two hotels, one drug store, one harness shop, two blacksmith shops, three churches, two schools, one physician and 200 inhabitants."

Mary Blaneuser's hand-written copy of the "History of Niles Center and Niles Township," written in 1892, writes, "Niles... the oldest village in the Township... contains three stores, two hotels, three blacksmith shops, a harness shop, a tin shop, a wagon-maker shop, a shoemaker, a brickyard, a potter and a physician. It contains 200 inhabitants."

*The Prairie Farmer*, an annual publication initiated at the turn of the century, accounted for landholdings of farmers and also indicated those who were tenant farmers in the area. While the areas of Maine Township which were to become present-day Niles were all being farmed, not one farmer was listed within the area on the original settlements at today's Milwaukee Avenue, Touhy Avenue, and Waukegan Road."
There is no exact or convincingly documented reason for the selection of Niles either as Niles Township, Niles Centre - changed to Niles Center before it was again changed to Skokie - or today's Village of Niles.

Interesting speculations have been suggested. Historian A. T. Andreas wrote in the "History of Niles" (1884): "There appears to have been but little organized political action previous to 1850 when the township was organized under the general law. On April 2 of that year, the first meeting for the election of officers was held pursuant to notice by the Cook County Commissioners. No account of the selection of the name of 'Niles' appears on the records, but according to the older settlers it was chosen at a public meeting held some time to the previous election."

Some years later, the August 25, 1929, edition of the Chicago Tribune suggested, "Where the name came from is a matter of conjecture. There was no family by that name among the settlers. But the city of Niles in Michigan, one of eight spots in the country with the name, was christened in 1929, and its namesake was the Niles Register, a newspaper of widespread political influence at that time, published in Washington, D.C."

A fact that makes it seem likely the Illinois town had the same source is that William Ogden Niles was connected with the Register as late as 1940 and Ogden is a name with a Chicago hook-up.

Anne Lunde, who has completed considerable research on the early history of Niles, details the Niles, Michigan, connection to the area later named Niles in Illinois. Lunde points out that soldiers stationed in Niles, Michigan, came to Fort Dearborn early in the 1830s. They were sent to assist Illinois troops in defending settlers during the raids by Indians during the Black Hawk War. Upon returning to Niles, word was spread of the rich farmlands back in northern Illinois. The earliest permanent settlers in present-day Niles were very aware of the rich farmlands that awaited them and this fact probably influenced their decision to come to Illinois. Also, there were three marriages between the first settlers in Niles, Illinois, who came from Michigan and troops or relatives stationed at Fort Dearborn.

In a history of Cook County, published in 1909, Niles was frequently mentioned relating to the settlement in Chicago: "There were no mail routes, post offices, nor post roads (in northern Illinois in 1831-1832).... Every two weeks a half-breed Indian was sent to Niles, Michigan for mail...." In 1834, a stage between Chicago and Niles was established twice a week.
For decades, perhaps even a century or two, Indians regularly trekked along the path where the rattlesnake was sunning himself the day Dobbin was pulling the elder lady Ebinger. Her husband and the newly wed Ebingers walked alongside. After stepping on the snake, Dobbin, legend says, was bitten by the rattlesnake. The Ebingers settled in the immediate area that would become present-day Niles. The trail on which the Ebingers arrived is today’s Milwaukee Avenue.

The name Milwaukee is derived from an Indian word, “milioke,” which can be translated as “good earth or country.” The transformation of this Indian trail to Milwaukee Avenue, which George J. Eckhoff, in 1927, called the “highest example of modern highway construction,” is a fascinating, if not incredulous, tale.

Eckhoff further predicted in 1927 that Milwaukee Avenue is “destined to carry in comfort and safety, a greater human and commercial freight than any like number of miles of street outside of the Chicago Loop.”

Eckhoff’s ancestors owned property along Milwaukee Avenue in and near Niles. His research was based in part on interviews with many Niles’ residents during the 19th century.

Writing a few years before Eckhoff, Alfred Bull states that, “In the boom days of 1835-37 the trail had become a meandering group of parallel ruts leading from Kinzie Street through Jefferson, Niles and Northfield, toward Deerfield.”

The ruts were deep and wide. Often six or eight sets were clearly visible. As each new team of horses or oxen made the trip to Chicago, they sought higher, smoother terrain. The trail widened in many areas; some estimate it became a mile wide and included today’s Elston Avenue. An average round trip from Northfield to Chicago took four days in good weather and twice as long in poor weather. During spring or in heavy rain the trip was impossible.

Drainage ditches were dug sometime in the 19th century. The road began to narrow and took a more definite path.

A. T. Andreas, historian of Cook County, describes the decision to survey the road and provides several interesting anecdotes.

“Silas W. Sherman, a prominent settler of Northfield, made a petition to the legislature to have the road established and surveyed. The petition was granted, and Asa F. Bradley (was) entrusted with the surveying of the road.

“The starting point was at Kinzie Street in Chicago. George N. Powell, who had then already a hotel, fearing that the road might not be located past his place of business, raised a flag and informed the surveying party that if they could strike that flag with the line of their road, a good dinner, with the best wine and whiskey, would be ready for them as soon as they arrived. There was never quicker or better work done in the history of engineering, than that between Kinzie and that flag.”

Andreas does not give the exact day of the survey. It would appear to have been in the mid to late 1830s. In explaining some of the abrupt and unexpected turns of Milwaukee Avenue another source stated, “In the renovation of 1835-1837, the landlord of the Green Tree Tavern near a northern terminal, was able to influence the road’s direction in his favor. As an incentive he offered
copious free potations to the surveyors who kept their eyes and lines snugly pointed toward his hospitable chimney pots."

Alfred Bull, after reviewing documents at the Chicago Historical Society, states the origin of Milwaukee Avenue, "its commencement being near the old Galena depot on the north side, the present site (Bull was writing in 1911) of the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad."

As Chicago began to grow rapidly in the 19th century, there was increased demand for the vegetables, milk, and other products grown in Jefferson (present-day Norwood Park), Niles, Wheeling, and other farming areas further northwest.

The roadway - surveyed, crooked, drained - was not sufficient to meet Chicago's demands. The idea of a plank road began to evolve as an answer to an all-weather road between Chicago and farm areas northwest of the city. Travelers, wagons, and all they carried would be kept out of the mud once the plank roads were built.

Plank roads probably originated in Russia and were introduced into the United States after somewhat successful use in Canada. Three-inch thick oak timbers were laid across two parallel wooden rails.

In 1849 construction of the Northwestern Plank Road (Milwaukee Avenue) began. The company was headed by a man named Mitchell. A settler by the name of Gould completed the project extending the road to Dutchman's Point in 1851. Gould also installed toll gates at Elston, Irving Park, and Western.

The cost of construction of the first 23 miles of this road, according to an account in Highways, Old and New, was $51,000. This included all toll houses, gates, and one bridge.

Amos J. Snell bought the Northwestern Plank Road in 1854. Snell ran the general store in Jefferson and had a contract to supply the Northwestern Railroad with wood for ties and fuel. The wood was cut along the North Branch of the Chicago River. Snell would then clear the land, build crude cabins, and sell them to new settlers in the area.

When Snell took control of the road, it was showing signs of deterioration. Snell, using a gravel surface, rebuilt the entire road and extended it to Wheeling. He added several toll gates. The toll gate for Niles was at the merger with Elston Avenue.

Many believed the original construction was poorly done. Not everyone agreed. Frank Whittington, a resident of Dutchman's Point since 1870, described excavating some of the plank and stringers when rebuilding a bridge near Hart's Road in 1883.

"The planks were still in good condition after almost forty years. The road was only eight feet wide, however, and the heaviest load had the right of way when it became necessary for one or the other to pull off the plank roadway in order to pass."

An interesting account of travel on the Northwestern Plank Road is given by Mrs. Mary Ann Calef, grandmother of a future Mayor of Niles. Eckhoff writes that Mary Ann came to Niles in 1848 from Scotland with her parents. She describes an incident in 1867:

"I had driven to Chicago early in the day and spent a considerable time at Smith's and Harvey's and Potter Palmer's stores and when I started for home my horse was eager to get there and set off at a brisk trot. We came to Fullerton and Milwaukee Avenues and I tried to rein him in to stop at the toll gate, but the harder I pulled the faster he went, and we not only did not stop to
pay toll, but took a part of the gate with us, for which my husband was required to settle later. We generally rode to Chicago in the bus driven by John Huntington. He charged a fare of thirty-five cents each way, and as a toll for one horse and buggy was twenty-five cents one way, there was not much saved by driving."

Travel to Niles, particularly on weekends, proved to be extremely popular. Records indicate that gates which normally took in $400 on a weekday, would average over $700 on weekends when used by picnickers and saloon guests to Niles and visitors to St. Adalbert's Cemetery.

Costs for freight passage, several authorities state, averaged about $10 per ton for each 20 miles.

The murder of Amos Snell in 1888 proved to be quite a sensational news story. His nephew, Willie Tascott, was the prime suspect. The search led detectives to all areas of the country and then to Europe. Tascott was never apprehended.

As the case dragged on, grumbling about the excessive toll fees charged by Snell was heard more frequently. There even was some speculation that Snell's murder was a result of a disgruntled user of Snell's toll road. Many tried to avoid paying a toll by driving around a gate.

In 1890, the plight of angry toll users was dramatically illustrated. Farmers dressed as Indians raided the Fullerton Avenue toll gate. They chased away the toll keeper and set the gate and his house on fire. The Chicago Tribune of May 3, 1890, quoted a bystander saying the fire was started "from spontaneous indignation." Police were called but did nothing. Only one toll gate collected tolls through 1891. In 1892 the toll road system was abolished.

As more of Milwaukee Avenue was paved in the 1870s, real estate values increased substantially along the route. Even the panic (as depressions were called) of 1873 did not affect or lower prices. Lots which sold for $750 to $1,250 along the road were being sold for twice as much wherever paving was completed.

With paving came development of street car or cable car transportation. These proved short-lived since young boys learned "how to drop a wire through a slot and catch it on the cable," writes Eckhoff. "A block of wood, tin cans, or a bunch of rags attached to the upper end of the wire would then go speeding along the middle of the tracks, scaring horses and doing other mischief as well as producing a lot of fun for the youngsters."

The first electric cars began operating in the 1890s. After completing a line to Lawrence Avenue, an extension brought it to the Northwestern Railroad station. A makeshift temporary line was laid to the city limits for all who were visiting St. Adalbert's Cemetery, the picnic groves, and the saloons in Niles on weekends. The extension was a single track. Agreement was reached with the street car company to lay a double track as soon as underground improvements were completed. There was much discussion of whether the street should be widened to 100 or 108 feet to accommodate the double track. It was agreed that the width should be 108 feet.

A further decision was made for the car line to reach the interior of the forested area between Chicago and Niles so that traffic on Milwaukee Avenue would not be cluttered at the end of the line. The first electric car arrived at this turn-around during the 1920s.
One of the largest cemeteries in the Archdiocese of Chicago, St. Adalbert’s, is located in Niles. It currently occupies 250 acres. Current internments average about 2,000 annually with total internments, since the cemetery was organized in 1872, approaching 300,000. In 1918, the year of the great flu epidemic, 4,000 burials took place. During the 1970s annual internments were about 2,600.

In October 1872 Father Adolph Bakanowski, C.R., pastor of the first and largest Catholic parish, St. Stanislaus Kostka, serving the newly arriving Polish immigrants to Chicago, and Father Joseph Molitor, pastor of St. Wenceslaus Bohemian Parish, joined forces in purchasing 21 acres of land for the purpose of a common cemetery in Niles, Illinois, at a cost of $5,500. Father Bakanowski delivered a Polish sermon and Father William Czoka gave an address in the Czech language.

The total amount of acres purchased in the early years of the cemetery development was much larger than the original 21 acres. In presenting a thesis to Loyola University on St. Hedwig’s Orphanage, the author mentions that “The committee next turned to the managers of the Polish-Bohemian cemeteries from whom they sought seventeen acres of land located at 72nd and Niles Road, which had just been purchased for $7,500. The requested land was donated (in 1907) by these managers after discussing the transaction with all the pastors. A sum of $3,000 was paid out of the cemetery’s treasury to the Bohemian pastors so they could lay no further claim to the land.” The intersection of 72nd and Niles Road is today’s intersection of Harlem and Touhy where St. Hedwig’s Orphanage was built a few years later.

The Dziennik Chicagowski, metropolitan daily newspaper of the Congregation of the Resurrection (C.R.), would write in 1945, “At the very outset, the Resurrectionists held the administrative posts on the Polish-Bohemian cemetery board of directors. The office of president, secretary, treasurer, and manager was (sic?) usually assumed by a Resurrectionist.”

Father Bakanowski returned to Poland in 1873. His successor as pastor at St. Stanislaus Kostka was Rev. Vincent Michael Barzynski, C.R. In a biographical listing of members of the Congregation of the Resurrection, Barzynski is mentioned as a "promoter (of the) St. Adalbert Cemetery, Niles, Illinois, 1874-1899 and President, Administrative Board, Polish-Bohemian Cemeteries, Archdiocese of Chicago: 7-1896."

This same reference continues, “In grateful recognition of Father Barzynski’s contribution to the development of the Polish American Community...his many friends and sympathizers, on the second anniversary of his death, erected on his grave at St. Adalbert’s Cemetery, Niles, Illinois, an imposing monument consisting of the Resurrected Christ atop a 20-foot column with a bust of Father Barzynski and a dedicatory plaque at the base.” A mausoleum was erected at the site and, after it was expanded in 1925, became the C.R. mausoleum for burials of members of the Congregation of the Resurrection.

Several Czech sources acknowledged that Rev. Joseph Molitor was the source for much antagonism in the Czech community in the early years of the cemetery’s existence. Many in the Czech ethnic group changed planned burials at St. Adalbert’s Cemetery. Two years after the cemetery opened, Rev. Molitor refused a Catholic burial to a woman, claimed Molitor, who had not fulfilled her sacramental obligation of confession. This action led to the formation of the Bohemian National Cemetery a few years after St. Adalbert’s was organized.
Nevertheless, many Catholics active within the Czech community were buried at St. Adalbert's over the years. An active Czech-Polish connection was cultivated. Representatives of the Czech community were brought into the administration of the cemetery well into the 20th century. The name, Czech Polish Cemetery, current officials at St. Adalbert's state, was printed on many burial documents during the first 50 years of the cemetery's existence. George Halas, a prominent member of the Czech community and owner and coach of the Chicago Bears, was buried at St. Adalbert's.

The name of St. Adalbert was important to both the Czech and Polish communities. St. Adalbert was a Czech saint who left his homeland to evangelize the poles in the north. St. Adalbert's Church, in 1873, was one of the first churches organized in Chicago which served the Polish American community. Before coming to the Chicago area and taking over the pastorate of St. Stanislaus Kostka in 1974, Father Barzynski founded the St. Adalbert Fraternal Aid Society in San Antonio, Texas, in 1868.

In The Dictionary of American Resurrectionists, 1865-1965, a rather comprehensive listing of all the offices occupied by members of the Congregation of the Resurrection is provided. Several examples are cited to reflect the influence of the Congregation of the Resurrection on the development of St. Adalbert's: Rev. John Kasprzycki, C.R., was the manager of St. Adalbert's in 1903-1904; Rev. Francis Gordon, C.R., was the manager of St. Adalbert's Cemetery between 1904 and 1911. In 1909 he was selected by the archdiocese of Chicago administrative board of the Polish-Bohemian-Slovak Cemeteries to compile the bylaws regulating the use of these cemeteries. Rev. Lawrence Usdrowski, C.R., filled the position as manager in 1941. In 1946, Rev. John Grabowski, C.R., was the manager. In 1949, the manager was Rev. Jerome Klingsporn, C.R. As late as 1954, Rev. Stanislaus Duda, C.R., was listed as the manager of St. Adalbert's Cemetery. Over the years numerous members of the Congregation of the Resurrection occupied positions on the administrative board of the Polish-Bohemian-Slovak Cemeteries (St. Adalbert's, Holy Cross, and Resurrection) of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

Information obtained from St. Adalbert's explains the administrative structure of the cemetery somewhat differently: "For many years, directors of the cemeteries were the pastors of the Polish, Czech and Slovak parishes of the Archdiocese and those directors appointed a board to administer the affairs of the cemetery. On this administrative board was one member who acted in the capacity of an executive director. The first such director in the early days of St. Adalbert's was Rt. Rev. Msgr. Thomas Bona, who had the longest record of association with the cemeteries of any priest in the archdiocese. He was appointed in 1912 and served continuously until his death in 1950, a period of 33 years. Msgr. John Zelezinski succeeded Msgr. Bona, and upon Zelezinski's death in 1957, Msgr. Edward E. Plawinski was appointed. In 1965, at the time of coordination of the Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese, Msgr. Plawinski became one of the four priest directors."

Sources from the cemetery also cite the importance of the superintendent: "Julius Szatkowski... was appointed in 1921 and served most years in that position. He was instrumental in purchasing much of the land for... St. Adalbert.... In 1951 he was succeeded by Cass E. Gramza (who) was superintendent...until his death in 1968. (In 1972 the) superintendent, now called sexton, (was) Adam Bona, Jr."