

Oak Park Public Library currently houses bound physical copies of The Oak Park News from 1951 and 1954 – 1965. This is a newspaper that does not exist commonly either digitally or physically. Searches have not revealed any resources that currently allow free access to this newspaper. The current physical condition of this rare collection is diminishing with time and has rendered the collection completely inaccessible to the general public due to the extremely delicate condition of the collection. This newspaper collection also potentially fills a gap on the Digital Michigan Newspaper Portal for newspapers featuring the geographic location of southeast Oakland County during the very pivotal post war period of the 1950s-1960s.

The Oak Park News from the early 1950s through 1965 focuses on the development of Oak Park as a rapidly growing city during the post-war baby-boom period along with the surrounding municipalities. The population of Oak Park at that time jumped from around 5,000 residents to around 30,000, with articles on the number of building permits approved, the types of housing being built (many Sears kit homes), the activities of local families, schools, crime, and civic life. Social topics such as mandated local censorship of comics and the sale of liquor are debated in the political and social arena with huge community involvement. The development of livable land was also discussed at length with details about paving roads, developing community resources, opening businesses, forming government, and solving problems. For example, due to the swampy nature of the land in Southeast Oakland County, solving sanitation problems like sewage drainage was a real concern that required 12 different municipalities to work together specifically during the time period these newspapers cover. There are many articles on how these Southeast Oakland County communities worked together to lay the foundation of how this now highly populated geographic area became livable and buildable space.

Oak Park News also illustrates Michigan history through the unique racial, ethnic, and religious beginnings of the City of Oak Park. The wetland characteristics of the land in Oak Park during the late 1940s led to the land being largely undesirable by well-off white families, so it was left to be bought by a large number of Jewish families and African American families, who both found, after serving in World War II, that their housing options were limited by sanctioned discrimination in many communities. That was not the case in Oak Park. This factor served as the foundation for the extremely diverse population that still lives here today. The Jewish and African American social and civic contributions to Oak Park and Southeast Michigan are well documented in the newspapers and serve as a rich historical archive of daily life, government proclamations (such as the City Council declaration of February as the month of “Brotherly Love”), and building of social structures, such as the library, recreation building, places of worship, and local parks. How these two very different groups of people came to be and remain integrated neighbors in the five square miles called Oak Park is a facet of Michigan history that people should have access to.

Like most newspapers, Oak Park News documented marriages, deaths, births, special occasions, graduations, and local job promotions. There is great interest in all these events amongst anyone interested in genealogical studies. There are also Oak Park connections to national figures examined, such as the article on JFK’s Oak Park cousin who grew up along side the president and was excited to attend his inauguration.

People from Oak Park are proud of their roots, enjoy their history, and are enthusiastic about preserving the past. This is evidenced by the recently formed public library program called the

“History Helpers”. This group of long-standing Oak Park residents come to the library once a month to look at unidentified photos in our archive. They use their experience living in Oak Park to identify places, people, events, and time periods so library staff can create better searchable records for digitizing the photos. These public participants have expressed overwhelming support of digitizing the newspaper collection, even if it means destroying them to do so. This group has rightly identified the fact that the papers will eventually disintegrate if we do nothing and all the important history of this area will be lost forever. Another demonstration of public interest and support of local history has been evidenced in the high rate of sales and interest of a recently published Oak Park History book. The book has garnered over 250 participants at around six different book events with book sales of the \$25.00 privately-published hardcover approaching 800.

Members of the public routinely ask if they can look in our archives and unfortunately, we must restrict access in order to preserve what little we have. It would mean a great deal to local residents to gain access to this vast collection of local history. Digitizing these newspapers would allow Oak Park Public Library to create a conduit of access to, not only Oak Park’s history, but also the history of many other local municipalities. Oak Park News frequently featured articles concerned with Royal Oak, Berkley, Ferndale, Huntington Woods, Birmingham, Hazel Park, Clawson, and Southfield. Each of these local areas have unique histories that Oak Park News helps convey, as well. For example, in the 1961 Oak Park News, classic Ferndale restaurant and LGBTQ+ safe space, Como’s, on Woodward Avenue, is featured in an article describing it as one of the first pizza-serving restaurants in the whole local area. Access to this article would have added historical context and decision-making information regarding the sale and re-opening of the building in 2019. These types of articles are important to the historical identity of the entire region.

The Oak Park Public Library exists on large subsidies from the City of Oak Park and a modest local millage. The legal service area consists largely of working-class individuals living mostly in modest homes and the climate for increasing taxes is extremely unfavorable. These factors contribute to a very limited budget for Oak Park Public Library. The Library’s only path to completing projects of this magnitude is through grants or state-sponsored programs that keep costs at a minimum. Despite not having large monetary resources, the Oak Park Public Library consistently has the support of local residents and area organizations. The City of Oak Park, Oak Park Friends of the Library, The Ferndale Historical Society, Oak Park Youth Assistance, and the Oak Park Library Board have all expressed support and interest in this project.

If awarded this grant, the Oak Park Public Library will provide access links on the website and advertise access and the grant award in all current marketing channels, which include an email newsletter that reaches almost 7,000 people monthly, our in-house advertising which reaches 5,000-6,000 people monthly, our quarterly City magazine delivered to every address in Oak Park, and our social media outlets (Facebook and Instagram). These physical, digital, and in-person avenues will ensure maximum access to this beloved historical resource and ensure that this rich history will be enjoyed and preserved.