

RURAL COMMUNITY STUDY OF SAUGATUCK, MICHIGAN

by

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SAUGATUCK TODAY

"A rural community is that form of association maintained between the people and their institutions, in a local area in which they live on dispersed farmsteads and in a village which is the center of their common activities".¹ Saugatuck, Michigan is such a community.

Saugatuck is a village of six-hundred and fifty people, incorporated in 1869, at the inner bend of the Kalamazoo river about a mile upstream of where the river empties into Lake Michigan on the Eastern shore.

The people comprising this village are of Dutch (Holland) descent. They are either fruit farmers, fishermen, boat builders or commercial enterprisers and of course there is a plumber, a mason, a painter, and carpenter and one blacksmith. The people very seldom leave the community permanently. The age pyramid would correspond quite closely to any natural group. There are many "old maids", but these are balanced by a like number of bachelors. These groups reside here, because admittedly "it is cheap". Children

¹"Rural Community Organization," Sanderson and Polson. John Wiley and Sons, 1939.

frequently go away to school but the majority return to the community. Saugatucks' early population (1872) was five hundred.² Today it has expanded by only one hundred and fifty people.

The village is twelve miles from Holland, Michigan, which is northeast of Saugatuck. Twenty-five miles straight east is Allegan, the county seat, and on the south are small country towns. An interurban was put into service in 1903 between Saugatuck and Holland. However, when the state roads came in, and automobiles were within reach of the public, the interurban became extinct (1920). A bus line now is the only mode of commercial transportation into Saugatuck.

Saugatuck has a modern telephone system reaching and serving village and farm people alike. Its newspaper, the Commercial Record, has a good volume of weekly sales (800) and finds little competition from the Chicago and Detroit daily papers. The Saugatuck community wants to know about Saugatuck.

Economically, the people depend in a major way upon the resort trade. The farmers have given up their dependency upon fruit trees, and have transferred to growing

²Early Memories of Saugatuck, May Heath, Berrmans, 1930.

produce salable to the resorters and, within the last three years, to poultry raising. The great timberlands that once were here are now depleted. Dependence is upon natural resources, that is, Saugatuck sells its beauty and natural facilities such as swimming, beaches, and favorable climate to the summer resident.

The town has one industry, a twisting factory, which will be emphasized later, and two crafts: there is one expert boat builder, Carl Bird, and another of the young town boys for the last five years has turned out bowls, bracelets, buttons, lamps, etc. out of the wood still to be found along the lake dunes.

Saugatuck has one lawyer, two doctors (one old, one young) and one banker. Of these, the banker is the only man who has much authority or leadership. He is a leader because he wields immense control over the financial conditions of the populace because many of the farmers must borrow money in the spring, which must be paid back when they harvest in the fall. The banker himself does not act superior, but his wife, and his daughter under the mother's influence, are the only "snobs" in the village. They feel "above" both the farm and non-farm people.

Saugatuck itself gives reason for a community survey merely because it is a well-organized rural community.

However, a more important reason is because it is a farm-non-farm area which shows no signs of conflict. On the contrary, friendly relations are proudly recognized.

ORGANIZATION OF THE SAUGATUCK COMMUNITY

The friendly relations are easily observed by anyone who knows the community. The farmers supply all the produce for the village that is possible. The storekeepers buy neighboring farmers commodities in preference to outsiders. Too, when the farmer sells door-to-door in the village he is not made to feel inferior, but is made to feel to be a friendly cooperator. Many farmers have modernized their homes to "catch" the traveling public for short stops. This has given the farmer a feeling of equality, for often a farm home is as nice, or nicer than a non-farm home. The village also approves of this, for it helps to hold business for the village entrepreneurs. Farmer and villager both connive to encourage the resort business. The sign at the village limits, "Village of Saugatuck, Summer Population 10,000, Winter Population 650", indicates that it is a resort town. Both the non-farmer and the farmer must make enough in three months to support themselves for the other nine and they recognize

this fact. This relationship however carries more than mere economical impetus. These people enjoy working together for the pleasurable feeling of success, a goal reached.

The resorters offered another opportunity for amiable interchange between farmer and non-farmer. The resort traveler gave rise to an antique area. There are, in the summer, about seven antique shops in operation. The dealers hold old fashioned Dutch Kaffee Klatches with farm women. The farm women can go into neighbors' homes to buy antiques reasonably and then they sell them or trade them to the dealers. Prices are monopolized at these afternoon coffees. If so-and-so can get three dollars for a Godey, or a hobnail piece, Mrs. Smiths' price goes to three dollars also. Some of the non-farm women are not mere procurers, but are, themselves, sellers. This relationship, too, has done much toward equanimity.

Both, too, provide recreation for the resorter. The farmers help, manually, if not pecuniarily, to see that shuffleboards, sailboat race prizes, baseball diamonds, swimming facilities, and all the other amusements are furnished.

However, upon isolating the community from the resort influence, we find this brotherly relation is not broken,

but is bound even tighter than an economic cause could bind. Many clubs exist in Saugatuck: the Womans' Club, the Tuesday Club, The Methodist Ladies Aid, the Past Matrons Club, the Book-Knit Club, the Busy Bee Club, the Kaffee Klatch, the Music Club, the Music History Club, the Eastern Star, and the Rebecca Lodge.

The Womans' Club is considered the most select. Hence, if there were any differentiation or a feeling of superiority on the part of the village women, this club would have very few farm women, for membership is by invitation. Of sixty-eight permanent residence members, twenty-four are ^{farm}women.³ The other clubs, too, have a large proportionate membership of non-village women. Due to this, there are no farm clubs. There is no grange, no

³Mrs. Donnelly, Silver Lake, asparagus; Mrs. Evans, school principal's wife, general farm; Mrs. Griffins, poultry farm; Mrs. Harris, berry farm; Mrs. Henwall, general farm; Mrs. House, apple farm; Mrs. Johns, general farm, concession at Goshorn Lake; Mrs. Kilgore, general farm; Mrs. Linholm, dairy; Mrs. Miller, horticulturist; Miss Morse, small fruit farm; Mrs. Naughton, general farm; Mrs. Patterson, retired teacher, general farm; Mrs. Preston, antiques; Mrs. Scott, fruit farm; Mrs. Sundin, fruit farm; Mrs. Sundin, general farm; Mrs. Taylor, berry farm; Mrs. Thomas, apple farm; Mrs. Van Leeuwen, general farm; Mrs. Voits, hatchery; Mrs. Webster, general farm. All of these fruit and general farmers have roadside stands. This table shows that these are not high-brow nor a selected type of farmer.

cooperatives. The village clubs satisfy this need.

For the farm men, too, this is true. The men come in to the Masons Lodge, and the American Legion Home and the Pokagon Club. The Pokagon Club holds adult educational classes after Wednesday night dinners.

Saturday night finds the Barber Shop, the grocery and the street corners crowded with farm and village men, hobnobbing, while the women shop.

The village too, offers something cultural to the farm woman. Musicales, plays, book reviews, are given regularly. The social calendar is well-organized. Each week is planned and there are no weeks in which something is not happening. The clubs, of course, meet regularly, the out-of-the-ordinary affairs are planned for Saturday and Sunday when all can attend without deserting their own special group. These women may belong to three or four clubs, integrating their own work so that they help each club. That is, they may review the same book for each of their clubs, and while some women may hear the review twice, the effort is appreciated. The club's attendance does not noticeably fluctuate with the seasons. In the winter they go to clubs for recreation, in the summer they go to further the plans to make Saugatuck a success through the resort season. All the clubs cooperate together during the summer

on bizarres, card parties, art fetes and exhibits, parades and dinners. This way no one has to neglect one of his clubs for another and bigger results are possible. The Womans Club owns their own building and often loans the auditorium to other clubs.

The churches of course sponsor the Ladies Aids which in the minds of the people are "clubs". There are four churches: The First Congregational, The Methodist, The Christian Scientist, and the All Saints Episcopal. It is noticeable that there is no Catholic Church. This is entirely due to the stable, unchanging Dutch population. The churches, together have three hundred twenty six members, the majority (93) attending the Methodist Church which is quite strict and nearest to the Dutch Reform religion. Many of these members, guessed to be about one hundred to one hundred fifty, come from the country⁴. The churches, excepting the Christian Scientist, often collaborate together. Sunday night and weekday services are held together, alternating from one church to another.

Farm people are often leaders in the village churches. The young people of the Methodist and Congregational churches

⁴Rev. Mackey, First Congregational Church.

unite into one Epworth League which is headed by a farm boy. The "Youth Hour" of the Episcopal church is also lead by a farm boy. Both the Young Peoples Superintendent and the Adult Superintendent of the County Council of Religious Education are non-village men.

Donations of food to the churches to be given to hospitals and the poor of Holland and Douglas are given equally by the farmers and non-farm people.

Of the membership of the four churches (totaling 326), eighty-seven, or thirty seven-percent are farm people. One sign of the churches' farm membership is the fact that there are no surrounding rural churches. A community will erect a church whether they can afford it or not if the need is felt, but evidently this need was not felt in this rural area. The farm population also figures greatly in the high school census. Of two hundred twenty-two school children, the majority (120) are farm children. This is to be explained in that the farmers have more children as a rule and also in that the type of farming is not one for which to keep children at home to help, and too, because the farm people encourage "schooling" up to final graduation.

Out of this area eighteen young men and women of which 8 are farm children are at present attending colleges. The school is on a University accredited list. Twelve of

these eighteen attend the University of Michigan. The others attend Michigan State because of lower costs.

The farm children, while in High School, receive equal newspaper notice and are as prominent as non-farm students. The basketball team is comprised of five boys from one farm family, three other farm boys and two village boys.

There is no P.T.A. One was established a year ago but died a natural death. No need was felt for it. Other relations were as fruitful. A system of Adult Education sponsored by the Kellogg Foundation is given at the High School however. On the school board are L. R. Brady, G. W. Parrish, E. H. House, Ed Force, and S. L. Newnham. One of these is a banker, one a drug store proprietor, one a Justice of the Peace, and two are farmers.

Excellent library facilities are offered in the way of three thousand books, and a large study room. The books are available to farm women and overdue fines are waived for them. Books are more-circulated to the village people. However, once a book is in the hands of a farm woman it may be loaned and reloaned by her, before it is returned to the library.

The farm and non-farm groups work together to furnish recreation and to sponsor community events. The harbor is

kept open for visiting vessels; a beach, tennis and shuffleboard courts, Venitian Nights (decorated boat parades), a dance pavilion, sailing races, model boat building, baseball diamonds, the Sea Scouts, an annual Christmas tree in the Village Square, a weeklong Art Pageant, the planting of many Iris-----all are backed by the community. The fire department too is a community enterprise. It is a volunteer organization. When the bell rings all the men close-by in the village "hop on". The department will answer any call, village or farm.

SINGAPORE THEN, SAUGATUCK NOW

It has of late become a recognized fact that farm and non-farm relationships are often one of conflict. Many statements can be found substantiating this: "The following types of conflict seem to outrank all others in significance: (1) town-country-----" ⁵; "Throughout the ages the unlikeness of town and country has bred misunderstanding and hostility"; ⁶ Sharp cleavages between villagers and countrymen seem to be much more pronounced in the Midwest" ⁷.

⁵Smith, Sociology of Rural Life, page 440. Harpers Bros., 1940.

⁶Op. cit., p. 441.

⁷Ibid.

Saugatuck is a rural community, that is it has a relationship between the people and institutions in the village and on the surrounding farms, that obviously is one of friendly and cooperative ecology. As this seems to be an atypical situation it seems worthy material for a rural community situation.

Saugatuck is really another village; the village of Singapore gave rise to Saugatuck. The plat of Singapore was laid on the North bank of the river at the horseshoe bend in section 4 on the shore of Lake Michigan and was about a half mile wide and extended about two miles along the beach. This settlement of three hundred to four hundred people was recorded in 1839.

Here at the mouth of the river was an ideal place for settlement. There were good pine stands all about and into the interior. There was a fast moving stream for booming the logs down from the interior and such a place would make a convenient, easily accessible shipping port. Then, too, the topography resembled the Zuider Zee, the homeland of these immigrant people. As lumberers began to cluster here, all of Dutch descent, and as more people came, there was a necessity for certain things so that these people might interact.

In 1837 a hotel, the Astor House, was built and was considered the finest hotel in the state. A bank which issued its own money was established in 1838; a general store, Carters, came into being along with a town hall. Soon another hotel and three more general stores constituted the final addition to Singapore's center.

Then as the forest was cut over, and as dams were being built upstream for paper mills and lighting plants it became harder to get the available trees downstream. Singapore soon found itself with a surplus of labor. More devastating than this however was a natural element which seemed fated to upset the equilibrium of this group. Natural changes came about so that the fine sand of the beach began blowing and drifting, penetrating the houses, clogging the mill machinery and covering the town.

In 1870 Mr. Moore, owner of the three large mills, decided to move the mills back inland, behind a range of hills which would furnish natural protection from the sand and also enable the establishment of the mill on the river again. Under this leadership the town packed up, left their houses to be completely covered by the sand and moved inland and founded Saugatuck, an Indian word meaning "mouth of the river"

TRANSITIONS IN SAUGATUCK

After this group had moved to Saugatuck it became apparent that the mills would no longer afford support for the entire population. Mr. Bandell, a lawyer, saw this surplus of labor and the possibilities that were opening up for the fruit farmer and he set out many acres of peach saplings. The rest of the community were soon to follow. The mill was on its gradual way out; the people split into two groups: those who were to farm and those who would offer services to these people---the business men. Being of Dutch descent these people lived in town, going out to farm their land each day.

The mill ran until 1884, and by this time the orchards were producing. This fruit business required transportation. The fruit was hauled by wagon to Hamilton where it could be shipped on the Pere Marquette Railroad to Grand Rapids, but the market there was small. The Chicago market would be much larger and much more recompensing. Water transport was the answer.

One of the captains of the fruit boats, Captain McVea, was bothered by the waste of coming back without any cargo. The solution was to bring passengers back on the return trip. Soon others imitated. This answered the need of the middle

class in Chicago for vacationing. Saugatuck was accessible pecuniarily and transportationally. As this resort business began to overlap the fruit farming, the soil was becoming exhausted, the farmers were not replenishing the fertility of the ground, and the fruit business was tapering off as motor transportation was enlarged.

Also because land transportation was facile, the water system was no longer useful, nor justified. The state road, M-11, when built in 1917 wiped out all boat transportation. Now, other farmers inland could compete in the markets which, with road transportation they were closer to, and to which they could consequently offer their produce cheaper.

At this time the fruit business lost all except the harder working farmers. The natural state was eroded, the timber was gone, the fields were infertile. The smart farmers began fertilizing the soil, rotating grass crops; the other farmers mortgaged their land, harvesting subsistence crops.

Cap Wilson had stopped operating his Chicago boat and had a surplus of money. In 1928 he invested this money in the first industry in Saugatuck. He set up a twisting factory, a concern which twists fine paper into twine. Detroit, Chicago and Grand Rapids furnished the markets.

M-11 was changed to U.S. 31 in 1924 and carried travel directly through Saugatuck. As transportation and roads were improved Saugatuck experienced a resort boom. A great dance pavilion was built, beaches were commercialized and advertised, hotels, tourist rooms, everything, responded to this resort wavetrade.

Since about 1935 the art colonies have begun to replace the strictly resort atmosphere. Four fine schools, The Gleason, The Arthur Kreibiel, Taylor, and Ox Bow Inn Studios call many people each year. The scenery offers wide and diverse choice and it is a pleasant, calm place to study. The summer trade now is a mixture of strictly resorters, strictly artists, and resorting-artists.

U.S. 31 was rerouted two years ago and now cuts off Saugatuck. Since then the town has rallied to reorganize around the resort-artist combinations. A fine harbor is offered to yachts; swimming accommodations with one of the finest beaches (The Oval), free shuffleboard and tennis courts, art exhibits, pageants, dances, musicales----all these things are offered to attract the traveler.

Saugatuck has gone from a pioneer lumber town through gradual growth to modern industry. Only one occupation has remained constant: the fishing industry and the associated boat building.

Through all of these stages the farm and non-farm people have been affected, yet each had adjusted to the other and kept friendly relationships.

BACKGROUND MAKES FOR FRIENDLY RELATIONS

As can be seen from the history, much of this well integrated ecology is a resultant of the two groups arising out of the same culture. The parents of each of these groups were once all originally from Singapore. As these groups advanced they separated, yet held like cultures. They grew proud of their new town, Saugatuck; each man felt he had a share in its' success. They were proud to have overcome their problems and to have roused Saugatuck from a sleepy lumber town to a lively village. These people are sober, hard-working Dutchmen. They do not admit defeat. In order to adjust to the crisis in their history they had to be interdependent or neither could have survived. They realized this. More than that, their community was one of kinship. Because many of the farmers lived in town and farmed land outside, farmer brother and non-farmer sister might be living next door to each other. Too, because of this there was inter-marriage to a great degree making a complex pattern of totemic relationship.

The people had a likeness in religious beliefs and rites. Though the groups had separate churches there was no sharp cleavage nor radical differences. Because their language (Dutch) isolated them somewhat from the surrounding English speaking groups, their mores tended to retain the old ways, taking new mores very slowly. The group was a compact group broadly speaking, and a common responsibility was felt. Here was not a clash of interests but rather one body of interest all aimed at success, of making this settlement a harmonious, permanent community. The occupational and economical interests were all aimed at this one larger goal. The people were fighting for the same thing and helping each other to get there.

These people have lived, and acted, and experienced together. The farmers prodromal period has been the same as the non-farmers. Due to the type of agriculture practiced here (male labor the rule), the farm woman has time to be active almost as much as the village woman.

It is feasible to say then that this well-organized rural community is due to the likeness in culture; that is, the same origins, like problems, the same crisis, the interdependent adjustments,-----all lead to the same beliefs, mores, loyalties and ways of life excepting for location of occupation and the type of occupation. There is a social solidarity, expressible in the "we feeling".

Following are several statements culled from conversations and the newspaper which show how strong this "we feeling" is:

From the Saugatuck paper, the Commercial Record:

Feb. 16, 1940.

I would hate to see a vacant place on the main street

Some of the righteous are worrying about Saugatuck's good name. Why? The week end hurrah crowd don't care whether we have wings or horns, so long as they have a good time. The art students do not expect to find angels hereabouts, but they do like our rustic surroundings. The cottagers who come mostly from large cities, have their own political scandals and are interested mostly in good weather, fair treatment in connection with traffic regulations and reasonable price tags on living necessities.

Feb. 9, 1940.

This free for all battle is on, the result of which has but one end; plenty of free detrimental advertising, while the village may be arranging, right at this time, advertisements extolling the beauties of Saugatuck. Do you realize the amount of damage done? This destructive publicity could be avoided. (In regard to a political argument.)

Perhaps if you give away 10 acre plots in the airport property you may entice industry to your village and make good on that slogan. Know of nothing that would pay better interest. . . .

If the Village Board is wrong, then use a little showmanship and say "It's Most Unusual." Los Angeles capitalized on this slogan, why can't you?

Boost, don't knock. If you get the urge to damn, just lock yourself in a closet think of your own family skeletons, then damn to your heart's content. If this don't work and you must write for the weekly forum, then, making allowances for human frailties, you should be able to at least say a few nice things that will go far toward making Saugatuck a bigger and better place.

I am proud of our town; "doggone" proud of it. Look what's been done in the past few years by our residents, and the village board. And right now I challenge any town twice our size to match us. Today ask any member of the board what is in mind for next year's work. Ask any man on the street the same question--what should be done, and I am sure they will say--I guess we are about caught up for a while.

During this week's severe weather have you had any difficulty in getting around? No, of course not. The two plows are out before daylight making the way easy for you.

And how about our streets, all of them. To my knowledge they are paved or oil treated except two and one-half blocks. Can any other town you know of show up that well?

Aren't you proud to tell of this? And how about our fire department? We couldn't have anything any better. Did you know that an alarm in the summer when all the volunteers are at their work that two minutes after the alarm is sounded that the fire trucks are on their way? Never thought of that, did you? Well, it's so. How about the Oval and all other recreation facilities we have that the summer people take to with so much pleasure? Better think of all these good features. Never mind a few that don't suit. The Village Board for the past three years have been working on a venture that will add greatly to the town and be a great asset, and after the next board meeting watch the columns of this paper for an announcement that will show you all what someone thinks of the beauties and possibilities of Saugatuck.

Did you ever consider why so many people of money, retired business men, etc., are buying up old run down real estate and revamping it into real show places? It's what we have to offer.

There are many other bright spots that have come to light in the past few years. Speaking of beautiful homes: How about the Springer home and Carl Koerman's Swiss chalet next door and Louise Crawford's studio. Jack Floto's

bungalow and of course the beautiful Jordan home. There are others, of course, including many homes of our residents.

And now comes the new and up to date telephone system, the same in quality and service as any of the largest cities.

In every community, whether large or small we find a few citizens that either thru lack of knowledge or having a case of chronic ill feeling toward everything and everyone are continually finding fault. To these few this column is dedicated.

Conversation:

"We've made Saugatuck the biggest little town in Mich."

"Our pavilion is the largest on the Great Lakes."

"We keep Saugatuck modern."

"Wheels roll out of town as fast as they roll in, but we have held the trade all these years."

