

Looking Back at Today

Sitting at the breakfast table, Henry Carson pushed aside his plate and poured himself another cup of coffee. As he picked up his journal, he pondered on how to begin this day's entry. So much had taken place over the past fifty years that the words seemed to fail him. After staring at the blank page for a few minutes, he finally decided that the simplest would be best, and so picking up his pen he wrote "Monday July 13, 2218, 50th Anniversary Celebration. We did it!" After writing down a few more thoughts, Henry closed the journal and turned his attention to reviewing his schedule of the day's events.

Henry and his wife Elizabeth were the last surviving members of the group that was instrumental in restoring Oakwood to its 21st century appearance back in 2168. Incorporated as the "Oakwood Historic Museum," it has become more popularly known as 21st Century Oakwood, and is dedicated to preserving the architectural and cultural heritage of a small Midwestern town as it appeared in the formative years of the early 21st century. Overshadowed by what has become known as the "Age of Technology," much of the culture of this era seemed to be lost to nostalgia and a few brief lines in local histories, until the Oakwood Restoration Foundation took on the challenge of bringing this forgotten era back to life.

Later that morning, Henry and Elizabeth reminisced as they walked to the museum's Visitor Center for the anniversary luncheon. As two of the guests of honor, they were seated at the head table along with the museum's president and the governor. Following lunch, several long time employees were asked to speak

about some of their experiences at the museum, after which Henry spoke of how the restoration came to be and expressed his hopes and dreams for its future. After a resolution was read by the governor, Henry announced that they were all to be escorted to a nearby site where a new structure was going to be built.

Arriving at the construction site, Henry announced for the first time to the public the details of this new building. As the future location of the Restoration's combined library and archives, all the historic resources scattered throughout town were going to be brought together and made available for museum staff and researchers alike. Breaking ground on the site, Elizabeth learned that the new building was to be named the Elizabeth Carson Research Center in her honor. Elizabeth began her career as a librarian in the town some 63 years before, and although her services were seldom in the spotlight, she was known to be responsible for much of the accuracy in the Restoration's efforts to recreate the past.

Known more for its 21st century appearance, Oakwood's story is actually much older. At first called Thomson's Cross Roads, Oakwood was settled in 1832 and acquired its present name in 1847 from a grove of oaks that stood for many years on the town square. Originally consisting of an inn, a few scattered houses, and some stores, Oakwood rapidly developed into being the commercial center of what was essentially an agricultural county. Its success seemed to be assured; however, in 1859 the decision to locate the railroad five miles north of the town caused Oakwood to lose its status as the county seat two years later.

In the years following the American Civil War, Oakwood saw a resurgence to its economy when various farm related industries located to the region. By 1900, the town's population grew to around 8400, and with the advent of the automobile,

Oakwood again became a marketing center of the region. Further development of the town in the 20th century focused on the east side of Oakwood while the western side retained much of its 19th century character. By the late 1960s, many of the older businesses on the western side of town were renovated and converted into various retail establishments specializing in antiques, crafts and high end fashions, while at the same time the residential area saw many of its older buildings replaced by more modern structures.

Although Oakwood continued to change to keep up with the times, the period between 2009 and 2160 saw many efforts to preserve at least a part of the town's architectural heritage. Some of these efforts were successful while others were short lived. Many important structures were lost due to neglect or simply age. By the time of the restoration, Oakwood could boast of having a sampling of 19th and 20th century architecture alongside some of the finest examples of early 21st century buildings in the state.

The decision to choose Oakwood as the museum's location came in no small part to Elizabeth's discovery in 2167 of two devices known in the 21st century as "flash drives," both of which laid unnoticed in a local archive for well over a century. The first of these contained a large group of images from the summer of 2013 depicting many of the businesses and residences on Main Street in Oakwood along with some of the more important buildings on the surrounding streets. The second of these devices contained a series of pictures detailing the appearance of a section of Main Street near Willow Avenue from 2013, all of which appeared to be taken during the annual Founder's Day Parade and Fair. Also included on this second flash drive were images of the town decorated for the Christmas holiday season. Various displays and trees were illuminated on the Town Hall Square, while candy canes and snowflakes were fastened to the lamp posts along Main

Street. Both of the town's churches had nativity scenes featuring live animals, and several of the stores had window displays showcasing new and antique toys and gift items.

Early in 2168, technicians from the Kappa Institute of Arlington, Virginia were able to restore a 2010 Dell laptop to functional working order, at which time all of the encrypted images, so long hidden on these flash drives, were retrieved and then reformatted for a contemporary computer system. The images of the buildings found on these flash drives aided the architects in their efforts to restore sixty-seven original buildings and faithfully reconstruct many of the more important structures that had vanished. The groups of spectators seen in the parade images gave graphic evidence to the costume department of the types of apparel worn in the summer months of 2013 in Oakwood, and helped them to recreate the celebrated period attire that is now worn by the museum's interpreters.

Details of the parade and fair, along with other facets of local history, were found in a scrapbook kept by an unknown individual. According to an undated clipping from the *Oakwood Press*, "For many years residents have secured chairs to telephone poles and street signs several days in advance of the parade. Many of these families have viewed the parade from the same location for years, and are likely to be in the same spot for years to come." During the parade each year, the museum continues this time honored tradition by placing reproduction 21st century lawn chairs in strategic points throughout the historic area. December likewise has become an exceptionally busy time for the museum as the colorful decorations that once graced the town have been reproduced and 21st century holiday traditions are again enjoyed by all.

Although Founder's Day and Christmas are still important annual events, the museum's portrayal of everyday life of the 21st century is what has captured national attention, changing Oakwood from being a quiet rural town to that of a major tourist destination. One of the difficulties faced at the onset of the restoration was the lack of contemporary documents dealing with commonplace events. Many important documents had been preserved through the years; however, it was found that much that was written in the 21st century was in reality far less permanent than many at that time had thought. Emails and text messages were frequently deleted, and with the constant influx of new devices, most of the older messages simply remained on the discarded hard drive.

During the restoration of a former computer repair shop located at 217 Willow Street, workers came upon a large stash of used laptops and electronic devices that had laid unnoticed for years in a remote corner of the attic. Although they had long ceased to be functional, the hard drives still contained hundreds of emails and text messages. Again using the services of the Kappa Institute, the Restoration was able to amass a collection of well over 20,000 electronic messages, all dating from the years 2004 to 2023. This collection has enabled reenactors to replicate messages on reproduction devices, and has provided researchers valuable insight into the day to day life of some of Oakwood's 21st century residents.

Over the years, the restored area has expanded to include other areas of the town. As originally planned, Oakwood's east side was to be primarily the location of the museum's visitor center and lodging facilities. However, five years ago, in an effort to relieve some of the congestion in the central historic area, a new museum complex was built at the site of one of Oakwood's early shopping centers. This new museum contains a motion picture theater that shows vintage movies,

and a reconstructed grocery store known as Kroger that incorporates interactive displays into its educational message. Visitors are given the opportunity to learn about what types of food were consumed and to see firsthand how they were marketed. Display cases show off meat, fish, deli and bakery items, and for the more adventurous visitor, there are small sample cases where bite-sized food samples can be enjoyed.

In addition to visiting Kroger, guests can also experience 21st century dining among the reconstructed eateries adjacent to the historic area. Oakwood's east side in 2013 was home to several national chain restaurants, including "Wendy's" renowned for their then old-fashioned burgers, and "Long John Silver's" which was known for its seafood. Referred to as fast food restaurants these establishments prepared simple cuisine that could be ordered and consumed in a hurry. Several of these establishments have been reconstructed, preparing their food on refurbished 21st century equipment using traditional techniques and ingredients.

Corporate archives for a few of these chains were preserved, thus enabling the Restoration's architects to faithfully reconstruct each of them to their original 2013 appearance. Cardboard and paper food wrappers have been reproduced using examples from the Steman collection of fast food memorabilia. This collection which spans from 1989 to 2037 was assembled by noted restaurant critic Joseph Steman during his long distinguished career. Some examples of the plastic flatware used in these restaurants were also found in this collection and have been reproduced for the guests' dining experience. These reproductions, which are also available for purchase in the museum gift shop, have the restoration's hallmark on them to differentiate them from the few rare examples that still exist. For example, in 2196, a complete service of "Wendy's" flatware from 2016, still in its original plastic wrappers, was sold at Christie's for the then record price of \$1200.00.

Other restaurants in the historic area include the renowned “Long Branch Inn” which first opened its doors to the public in 1856, and has been in continuous service ever since. Restored to its 2015 appearance, the inn incorporates the menu choices of the 21st century while paying homage to its 19th century heritage with a collection of antiques and furnishings reminiscent of its earlier beginnings. Other eateries that have been opened in the historic area allow guests to fully experience the 21st century throughout their visit. Light fare is available at the Main Street Bakery and the nearby Starbuck’s Coffee Shop. Open seasonally, the Zip-Dip ice cream shop offers various soft serve ice cream desserts along with hot dogs and burgers.

Overnight accommodations are available in the historic hotels located adjacent to the restored area. The Best Western Oakwood and the neighboring Holiday Inn Express have both been reconstructed on their 21st century sites and are furnished throughout with period reproductions. Combining the best of both centuries, guests can experience the charm of the old with all of the comforts of the new. While striving for historical accuracy, all the amenities have been updated to meet the requirements of today’s guests.

While food and lodging are important to the visitor’s comfort, the exhibition buildings are what provide the appeal and educational experience that continually draw visitors to 21st Century Oakwood. One of the most popular buildings, especially with children, is the restored Post Office facility located on Poplar Street. Built in 1997, this building served as the county’s main Post Office until 2073. Tours of this building include the opportunity to actually write and mail a letter, much the same as our ancestors once did. Stationery and envelopes are available for use, and once written, the guest can have the letter delivered to their home by any current delivery method. Vintage stamps are placed on the envelopes

which are then cancelled with a commemorative postmark similar to one used by Oakwood's Post Office in 2011.

Equally popular with children is the Oakwood Toy Store at the corner of Poplar and Main. Originally built in 2006, this restored building exhibits the Carrie Rose collection of late 20th and early 21st century toys and board games. Select items from this collection have been reproduced by the Restoration and are available for purchase along with other vintage reproductions. Adjacent to the toy store is the building that houses the Restoration's collection of vintage arcade games that guests can still play. Kiddie rides, similar to those that were once a common feature outside stores and shopping malls, have been refurbished and can be enjoyed by the youngest of guests.

Some of the other stores in the historic area include a clothing store, a hardware store, and a pharmacy or drug store. Each of these stores exhibit period merchandise and interpreters are present to answer questions that may arise from some of the more unusual items that are on display. Each store has merchandise available for purchase, reproduced from examples found in the collections of the Restoration. As vintage items were in vogue in the early 21st century, efforts have been made to select only those items that are appropriate to the period of 2010 to 2015. Costumes are available in the clothing store and are able to be rented by the day, or can be purchased by those guests who wish to enjoy the comfort of the antiquated fashions of that earlier time.

Automobile tours of the restored area can be booked at the reconstructed BP service station on Grove Street. A variety of authentic 21st century automobiles are available including a Dodge Neon, Subaru Outback, BMW Z4 convertible, Ford Focus and a Chevrolet Silverado. All have been meticulously refurbished and

provide guests the opportunity to view the city while riding around in the comfort of an authentic period vehicle. Although the engines have been modified to accommodate modern fuel, the restored vehicles are precise in every other detail.

Adjacent to the BP is the restored showroom and garage of Oakwood's 21st century Ford dealership. Displays include the furnished showroom of what was one of Oakwood's premier car dealers, and the repair shop which has been outfitted with original tools and lifts. Interpreters are on hand to let 23rd century guests experience what it was like to purchase a car nearly two hundred years ago.

The group of cars in the showroom represents Ford's 2013 line of vehicles and each has an authentically reproduced manifest prominently displayed on a side window. These manifests show not only the total price, but also what options were available and the individual cost for each. Of special interest is the rating of miles per gallon of fuel, which in all cases is far less than one would expect today. Additional antique automobiles dating from 2002 to 2025 are on display in the service garage and in the adjacent annex building which was the showroom for the better used (or as they were then known) pre-owned vehicles.

The residential section of the historic area has over twenty houses that have been refurbished to showcase the possessions and living spaces that reflect the daily life of Oakwood's population in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Open for public viewing, each of these buildings has been furnished to reflect the variety of tastes in decorating that were prevalent at that time. Period antiques have been extensively used in each of the buildings, with reproductions being utilized only when the original item would require a more controlled archival environment to survive.

The museum has been extremely fortunate in acquiring several important collections of original 21st century furniture. Prominent among these are the many original pieces of “Sauder” furniture that were donated in 2169. Due in part to the extensive use of particle board, much of this furniture has failed to survive the years. On the other end of the scale are several pieces of Thos. Baker outdoor furniture and a Henredon dining room and bedroom set. All of these latter pieces were donated by a local family and came from the estate of Michael Hageman, a prominent lawyer in Oakwood from 1987 to 2032.

In the kitchens and pantries, guests have the opportunity to view the Restoration’s renowned collection of antique storage containers. Being the nation’s largest assemblage of original “Tupperware” and “Rubbermaid” items known, this collection has been featured in numerous publications and documentaries over the years. Equally notable is the collection of appliances and electronic devices on display. Although somewhat primitive by today’s standards, the hand held devices, televisions, and computers found in these homes were considered to be quite advanced in their day.

Photographs dating from the early 21st century were located for some of Oakwood’s homes, and through these several of the exhibition rooms were able to be recreated. Although resources exist that can identify what items were available to the 21st century consumer, the task is obviously more difficult, if not impossible, to know what any one family or person might have purchased for their home. Because of this, most of the restored homes are not intended to recreate the living space of any one family in particular, but rather to evoke the mood of the time.

One problem that has occurred in restoring the buildings is that so much of the plastic used during this period was recycled over the years making it difficult to

find original pieces when a replacement is needed. For example, switch plates and outlet covers were commonly manufactured using a plastic that is no longer able to be produced. When a modern part needs to be replaced, it must be made from a composition that closely simulates the appearance of the original. Likewise, in the early years of restoration, some of the window and door units had to be fabricated specifically for the museum as the styles used in the 21st century were no longer produced. This however has changed and today two national home improvement companies carry the Oakwood line of hardware and lumber.

One of the most popular houses in the restored area, due in part to the prominence of its early occupants, is the boyhood home of U.S. President Joseph F. Huber. This Victorian “Painted Lady” was built in 1893, and was Huber’s home from his birth in 2015 until 2034 when his family moved to an estate near the state capital. In 2064, after serving in the Senate for twelve years, Huber was elected Vice President under President John E. Holthaus.

One month after taking office in 2065, President Holthaus returned to the steps of the Capitol, and before a large crowd that included Senators and Congressmen, delivered his immortal “To hell with this nonsense” speech after which he resigned from office. Huber was then sworn in as the 53rd President, and the Holthaus speech became the rallying cry of the generation. This ushered in an era of renewed nationalism and pride that was mirrored in the policies of the Huber administration.

The Huber home has been restored by the National Park Service to its 2015 appearance, and contains many items associated with Joseph’s boyhood years. Located on what was then the edge of town, the Huber property contains an extensive vegetable garden along with an orchard in back of the house. Both have

been replanted and contain only the varieties of fruits and vegetables that one would find growing in this region at that time. Seeds and cuttings from these plants have been used in the other gardens of the restored area, and are available for purchase in the Restoration's garden shop.

Another site associated with Huber is the reconstructed Oakwood High School which served Oakwood from 1997 through 2072. Operating as the educational center for the museum, it is also the location for the Museum of Social Media with interactive displays that allow the visitor to actually view original 21st century transmissions from what was then known as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. Rooms on the first floor of the building are furnished with period educational apparatuses including laptops and smart boards. Interpreters are on hand to explain 21st century teaching methods and show how students used the materials then available.

Lectures are given in the school's auditorium on various historical subjects by museum staff along with distinguished guest lecturers and authors. Museum sponsored symposiums on transportation, cooking, and 21st century antiques have become annual events, drawing ever increasing numbers of guests and scholars.

Two restored buildings that still serve their original purpose are St. Matthews Roman Catholic Church and Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, both of which are on Main Street and have been in continual use since the 1980s. Both of these buildings have been restored and tours are available for visitors when regular services are not in progress. Although there is no charge for touring these churches, donations are freely accepted.

Much of the local culture of Oakwood has always centered on its agricultural pursuits with its major industries being food processing and distillation

of Whiskey. Two miles south of the town is the Harris Farm, and nearby are the Oakwood Foods processing plant and the Isaac Carson Distillery all of which have been restored to show their appearance as they would have been in the 21st century. At the Harris Farm, 75 acres are planted in corn, rye and wheat, with an additional 20 acres being reserved for peas, green beans and other kitchen vegetables. All of the crops are of vintage varieties and are planted using only the machinery and techniques known at that time.

About a quarter of a mile from the Harris Farm is the processing plant for Oakwood Foods, Inc. Built in 1998, this factory produced canned and flash frozen vegetables which were then sold under the store label of several major grocery chains. Additional structures were built in 2055 and 2137, with the original building serving as a warehouse and later a distribution center. Restored in 2172, the 1998 factory now operates as an exhibition building and houses refurbished equipment and interactive displays that show how food was processed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Limited amounts of food are still processed here on original equipment, primarily supplying the historic restaurants in town.

In its heyday, Oakwood could boast of having three distilleries, now only one remains. Established in 1877, the Carson Distillery was the largest of the three along with being one of the oldest companies in the region. For over three hundred years now, the Carson family has produced exceptional bourbon along with several top shelf varieties of blended whiskey using only the grains grown in the area. Gaining national recognition in 2017 with the collaboration of country music legend Willie Nelson and his “Whiskey River” blend, the Distillery has long been a positive influence to the region’s economy. Tours of the distillery include three restored 19th and 20th century structures along with two warehouses built between 2018 and 2023, and include the opportunity to sample some of the ware.

Henry Carson began working for his father at the distillery shortly after college, and assumed responsibility for managing operations in 2162. Always interested in local history, Henry was instrumental in bringing together the group of investors, architects and historians that restored Oakwood to its earlier time, and assumed the role of Chairman of the Board of the museum for thirty-three years. Handing over the responsibilities of the distillery to his son Joseph in 2187, Henry then devoted his full attention to overseeing all aspects of the Restoration.

Returning now to Oakwood's anniversary celebration, after the groundbreaking ceremony, Henry and Elizabeth returned home to rest a little before the evening program. Sitting in his library, Henry surveyed the shelves that held the journals and scrapbooks he had kept since his early days in college. Now encompassing sixty-seven years of his life, the pages of these books recorded not only his personal experiences, but also most of the important events that had taken place around him. Pouring himself a glass of wine, he thought about all the people mentioned in these volumes who were no longer a part of his life, and brushing away a tear, gave them a silent toast. After writing a few lines about the afternoon's events, he opened up a cabinet under one of the bookcases and took out a small wooden box, the contents of which he would need later that evening.

Unable to rest, Henry picked up his glass of wine and went outside to enjoy the summer afternoon on the deck of his restored home. Although not an exhibition building, the Carson's restored home has been the scene of many official gatherings for important guests and Henry saw to it that the house was complete in every detail possible. Elizabeth consented to having a deck included in the restoration; however, she drew the line at having a gas grill, an implement that she considered both unhealthy and primitive at the very best.

Sitting in the shade of the awning, Henry's thoughts turned to 2012 when the house was built, and he wondered what the people were like who lived there at that time. Had they ever sat on their deck and thought about the past as he did now, or more importantly, could they have ever foreseen a time in the future when their home would be considered an historic landmark? How would the knowledge of future events have affected their lives? Would they have been able to enjoy living in their house, or would they have been so concerned with preserving it that life there would have become a chore? Henry saw Oakwood's buildings as more than just a form of shelter; he saw in them a reflection of those who once resided there, a reflection that might include asymmetrical additions or styles introduced that were incongruous to the original design. Although many of these later additions were inconsistent to the goals of the Restoration, Henry felt that some of the additions gave the buildings a character that was sadly lost when finally removed.

Henry's interest in architecture was not limited to the buildings themselves, but also included the tools that were used to build them. His personal collection contained primarily 19th and 20th century tools, and he preferred those examples that showed obvious signs of wear. Pristine examples were fine for a museum's display case, but Henry felt a closer bond to the time worn items that had actually seen service in constructing something. He felt the same way with the artifacts in the Restoration. Items that were still in their original packages or had been on someone's shelf, or worse, in a closet and were never used were sterile and had failed to serve the purpose for which they had been originally intended.

Looking out over his backyard, Henry thought about some of the things that people take for granted in their lives. As he sat listening to the birds and crickets in the field behind his house, he became aware of the sound of a distant lawn mower, along with faint sounds of traffic passing on the nearby streets. These sounds often

went unnoticed; however, today he was trying to imagine how it sounded two hundred years ago. Were the sounds the same? What was different? While the answers to these questions were elusive, he wished that something could be done to preserve the sounds he was hearing just then.

Henry could have gone on musing for some time had Elizabeth not come outside to remind him that he had to get ready for the evening's activities. As they walked down Willow Street, they discussed the plans that had been made for the evening. Rather than having a formal banquet to end the day's celebration, it had been decided that having a traditional country picnic at Founder's Park would be more in order. Recreating a celebration held in 2019, guests have their choice of either roast pork or fried chicken along with all of the fixings. Desserts include homemade pies and ice cream, and once all have had their fill, they will assemble at the park's amphitheater to hear a concert of vintage music performed by the Restorations musician's.

On arriving at the park, Henry walked to the amphitheater to check on some last minute details. Pleased that everything was in order, he made his way through the crowd to his reserved table. Glad that there would be no speeches, Henry's only official duty that evening was to welcome everyone to the picnic, and then direct them to the food tent for their meal.

Following the evening concert, several of Henry and Elizabeth's closest friends gathered in the Carson's home to conclude a successful celebration. On a table in the center of the room was a tray with glasses along with the bottle of brandy that Henry had put aside fifty years ago and had taken out of hiding earlier that day. Pouring each guest a small glass, Henry proceeded to give a toast. "What has been accomplished here at Oakwood will hopefully be repeated elsewhere.

While it is difficult to imagine that anyone will want to recreate a town from the 23rd century in the future, it is a possibility that we cannot ignore. Let us then make a pledge to preserve what we can from the present, just as we have the past, and hold it in trust for the generations yet to come.”

The time was close to midnight when the last guest left, and although they were tired, Henry and Elizabeth did not feel like going to bed just yet. Henry went into his library and opening his journal finished writing the day’s entry. For a moment he looked at the next blank page and wondered if he should write something on it to sum up the past fifty years. Lifting his pen, he stopped short of actually writing anything down. After thinking about it for a moment, he slowly closed the journal and placed his pen back on the desk. Why should he write any conclusion, after all at 87 he still had many years ahead of him. Many more years that he could spend looking back at today.

Richard Kesterman

October 7, 2013

[Note: The town of Oakwood exists only on the pages of this paper, and is not intended to represent any actual town. Its exact location was purposefully not given since it contains fragments of details gathered from my visits to small towns in several states.]