

CELEBRATING 60 YEARS OF GROWING GREAT PARKS



OAKNotes Special Edition February 2026

### In this issue

- Director's Update: Oakland County Parks from 1966-2026 and beyond
- Reflecting on six decades of fun and innovation
- Oakland County Board of Commissioners recognizes milestone
- Making history from rural farms to vibrant parks
- Celebrate parks history during virtual Fireside Chats series

---

### Thanks for 60 great years together and here's to many more

It's easy to take for granted the incredible parks and natural spaces we enjoy today. But it began with a choice.

In 1966, Oakland County voters approved a new parks millage by just 51 percent - a slim margin that made all the difference. That single decision made the founding of Oakland County Parks possible.

In the decades since, thousands of acres have been preserved and developed into the outstanding park system we love today. Dedicated public servants have acted as stewards of these special places. And countless memories have been created - first hikes, family gatherings, quiet mornings on the water, afternoons that turned into traditions.

None of it was inevitable. It happened because people chose to make it happen, and kept choosing, year after year.

Today, Oakland County looks very different than it did in 1966. So do the challenges we face. In a post-pandemic world increasingly shaped by the impacts of a changing climate, we are again adapting -focusing on health, access for all, year-round activation and reaching residents who haven't yet experienced what these parks can offer.



That work continues because of you. The voters who said yes. The families who show up. The community that believes public land matters.

Thank you for 60 years. Here's to what we'll build together next!

Parks Director Chris Ward



### **Celebrating 60 years of community connection, outdoor fun**

Preserving natural areas, enhancing outdoor community spaces and offering unique recreation programming for individuals of all ages and abilities has always been the mission of Oakland County Parks (OCP).

As the parks system commemorates its 60th anniversary, it's clear that providing these connections with nature helps boost mental and physical health. Communities have benefitted as a whole from green spaces, recreation activities and outdoor play.

Nearly 2 million guests visit the parks each year and many more attend events, festivals and other activities where OCP provides mobile recreation units, nature education and additional opportunities.

### **Key statistics**

- 73 percent of Oakland County residents will live within three miles of a county-funded park by 2030
- 560 acres were added to the parks system through partnerships in 2025
- An additional 640 acres are subject to proposed partnerships

Read the [60th anniversary news release](#) for more information about OCP's history, growth and achievements. To learn more about current projects and

upcoming events, visit [OaklandCountyParks.com](https://OaklandCountyParks.com). Share your thoughts on future parks projects by visiting our [Co-Creation Lab](#).



*The Oakland County Board of Commissioners honored Oakland County Parks and Recreation Commission (OCPRC) with a proclamation to celebrate its 60th anniversary on Feb. 19. In attendance were (from left) Graphic Designer Garrett Ebbeling, OCPRC Commissioner Shanell Weatherspoon, Manager – Operations Jim Dunleavy, Oakland County Commissioner and OCPRC Vice Chair Yolanda Smith Charles, 60th Anniversary Ambassador J. David VanderVeen, Oakland County Water Resources and OCPRC Commissioner Jim Nash, Oakland County and OCPRC Commissioner Christine Long, OCPRC Chair Ebony Bagley, OCP mascot Oakie the Squirrel, Oakland County Commissioner and OCPRC Executive Committee Member Ann Erickson Gault, Manager – Strategic Planning & Performance Dr. Esther Jackson, Parks Historian Carol Bacak-Egbo, Recreation Program Specialist Heaven Ortwine and Parks Sponsorship Coordinator Robin McGregor.*

---

**Our rural roots: Tracing OCP's history from farms to parks**

Today the Oakland County Parks (OCP) are home to nature centers, playscapes and fishing docks but once the lands that became our parks were home to barns, corn cribs and outhouses. The reason? All our parks were once farms; in some cases, many farms and in others, just one.

For example, an 1872 map shows that the land that became Independence Oaks County Park consisted of 14 farms at that time, including those of the Bailey, Belitz and Baldwin families. In that same year, only the horse farm of Charles C. McCartney was on the land that became Pontiac Oaks Park.



It isn't just old maps that are evidence of OCP's rural roots. Sometimes it's something as simple as a lilac bush. You'll find a huge one near the parking lot off Fish Lake Road in Rose Oaks Nature Park (first photo). Lilacs are a sure sign that someone once lived nearby. People frequently planted them next to their outhouses in the days before Febreze or Glade!

This particular bush was part of the old William Fillingham farm. The house and barn are long gone and so is the outhouse that likely was located very close to that lilac bush.



In some cases, we still have old foundations of farm buildings in our parks. Off Baldwin Road in the western part of Orion Oaks Nature Park is a stone barn foundation that was likely part of the Gingell family farm. Near the Spring Lake Trail in Independence Oaks County Park, you can still see the foundation of the farm house of the Belitz family who came from Prussia in 1860.

Other remnants of farm history in our parks include stone fence rows and old fence posts. For example, at Addison Oaks County Park and Campground, there are two old rusty fence posts in the eastern part of the park (second photo).



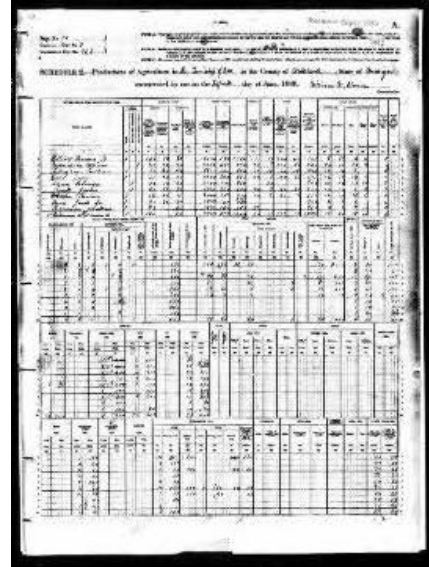
They are the last visible features of the Shoemaker homestead that dated back to the 1840s. Fortunately, we also have a photograph of that farm (third photo).

We also have historical sources that help us understand more about our rural roots. For example, in 1850, 1860, 1870 and 1880 the federal government did an

agricultural census where they were counting cows and pigs instead of people (fourth photo).

These records give us a glimpse into what a farmer was growing and the livestock he owned. According to the 1880 record, William Fillingham, who owned that old lilac bush at Rose Oaks, had seven cows, 90 sheep, 11 pigs and 35 chickens that year. He was growing corn, oats, wheat and potatoes. He also had two acres of apple orchards containing 60 apple trees.

Here's something else to think about: The farmers who began these farms were not the first farmers to plant crops on land that became our parks. That history belongs to Indigenous farmers who planted crops such as corn long before the Bailey, Belitz and Baldwin families. For example, an early non-Indigenous settler near the land that became Southfield Oaks Nature Park reported finding “the usual signs of ancient Indian occupation... small patches of maize” when he first arrived. So, as you can see, the rural roots of our parks go far back in time.



1880  
CENSUS OF AGRICULTURE IN THE COUNTY OF OAKLAND, STATE OF MICHIGAN  
COMMENCED BY ACT OF LEGISLATURE, JULY 27, 1876. SECTION 5, CHAPTER 25, ACTS OF 1876.

NAME OF FARMER	LAND IN ACRES	WHEAT	BARLEY	RYE	BUCKWHEAT	WHEAT	BARLEY	RYE	BUCKWHEAT	OTHER GRAIN	CORN	OATS	POTATOES	APPLES	ORCHARD TREES	CATTLE	HOGS	SHEEP	CHICKENS	OTHER LIVESTOCK
William Fillingham	100										100	100	100	100	100	7	11	90	35	

---

### Hear history come to life during Fireside Chats series

Join us on Zoom as Oakland County Parks Historian Carol Bacak-Egbo shares fascinating history connected to Oakland County Parks during her Fireside Chats. Discover stories you never knew about the parks, learn about how the park system's natural assets shaped the region and gain an appreciation for those who cared for the land before we became stewards of it.

Bacak-Egbo's next Fireside Chat will be from 7-8 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 25. The topic will be “To Find a Home Where We Would Be Free: The Story of Mary Parker and Her Family.” Learn the story of freedom seeker Mary Parker and her journey from enslavement in West Virginia to freedom in Pontiac.

Fireside Chats is a free program series. Join online by clicking on this [Zoom link](#). There is no need to preregister.

For more information and individual program links, view the [Fireside Chats Flyer](#).

---



**FREE  
EVENT**

*Save The Date*

# **Oakie's Birthday Bash**

*Friday, July 24, 2026 5:30-8:30 p.m.  
Independence Oaks County Park*



Follow OCP on  
facebook



View park photos  
and highlights