

What Happened to Oakland's Downtown?

Downtown Oakland.....Well folks, I'm sad to say that this term is a bit of an oxymoron. No, I'm not poking fun at it and I'm not even attempting to abuse the priceless memories of those who grew up here and remember the charm of this village during a bygone era.

So why is it an oxymoron and what happened to whatever we refer to as downtown Oakland? It's an interesting albeit very sad story. Let's take it from the top all the way back to the true founding of Oakland in 1869 when David C. Bush brought the railroad to this village. He built his home across from the tracks in the same year which also served as the ticket office for 3 years and as the Oakland post office. In 1872 he both donated the land for our railroad station and even plunked down \$500 of his own money to pay for the materials to build it.

So, in 1872 the wilderness of a farming Oakland had a railroad, a railroad station and large house serving as a ticket agency and as the post office. Then realizing that local citizens needed stuff that the railroad could deliver to them, Mr. Bush built his store in 1877. It ultimately became the beloved Wigwam, the singularly iconic Oakland building of an entire generation.

Oakland by 1877 then had the magical and primordial stuff of being a center of commerce (or dare I say town?) unto itself with thanks to the initiative solely exercised by Mr. D.C. Bush: Railroad tracks, a railroad station, a railroad ticket office and a post office. The germ of a town was growing in the wilderness among the farms of the Ramapo Valley. Just call it pixie dust.

I ask the reader to consider the fact that virtually every town in Bergen County, all 70 of them, were founded and developed around their railroad stations. And further consider that their railroad stations gave rise and impetus to the development of their downtowns as business districts. Indeed, their downtown business districts were literally built either next to or around their railroad stations. These stations became a mecca for stores and commerce of all sizes and types.

But not Oakland.

It seems that Oaklanders had a different view of the world and what a main street ought to be. Generally speaking, we built beautiful Victorian homes along Ramapo Valley Road near the railroad tracks and station. Yes, it is true that there were some businesses around the railroad tracks and station and that some even developed because of the railroad.

Obviously there was the Bush General Store in 1877. And there were also the Oakland Hotel, the McNamee Store and the Lloyd store. And who can forget gun powder works with its own rail spur. Even the Calder residence was greatly expanded to become the Calderwood Hotel in the early 1900s. But in total, these were few and a mere core around

the railroad tracks, nothing like that which was developed in other communities under the same circumstances. Yup, up and down Ramapo Valley Road within spitting distance of the tracks, Oaklanders built beautiful Victorian homes, not commercial buildings or stores.

The McNomee ancestral home, now the Remax Real Estate building and previously owned by the Yoeman family, was built literally next to the D.C. Bush store. And next to it there was a home partially hidden in the 1960s by Ralph's Pizza. Across the street, there was a line of houses built literally next to the Oakland Hotel. And there was the Penny House where Oakland Drugs now stands and the house next to it, currently recessed behind and to the right of the Lukol gas station, was once curbside to Ramapo Valley Road. And next to the Calderwood, there was the 19th Century Neilsen House and the Kestler House. And all that is in the space of 2 blocks from the Oakland Railroad Station. The point is that beautiful homes actually once dominated what we now consider 'downtown' Oakland, not stores or industry unlike the vast majority of other communities in Bergen County. If there were stores and retail establishments instead of homes surrounding the railroad station, Oakland probably would not have suffered its architectural devastation or at least as much as it has. As Oakland grew, these homes became vulnerable and victims to 'progress'.

The Valley of Homes was soon to become the Vast Desert of Strip Malls.

That's my cue to share the details of our progress leading to what we have (or don't have) today. In other words, what happened to downtown Oakland.

In a word it was politics and the lack of vision of biblical proportions that did us in. And, I hasten to add the 'times' and apathy of Oakland's citizens.

Think about it...Up until 1956, Oakland was truly a Mayberry with not even a traffic light. Our population in 1950 was 1,817 souls and in 1960, it had exploded to 9,446, an increase of over 500%. New residents began to flood into Oakland particularly as Route 208 was beginning to approach our borders. It is said that between 1950 and 1960, over 300 new houses were built per year in Oakland. For the most part these new residents came from either a city such as Paterson or New York City or from the eastern part of the county. Regardless, as taxpayers they demanded the services and resources one might expect from a larger community.

We didn't have any shopping to speak of as everyone simply went to Pompton Lakes to purchase everything they needed. But while there was no real shopping, Oakland did have a lot of space (aka fields and homes) along Ramapo Valley Road in the center of town. Additionally, the shopping malls along Routes 4 and 17 were opening and causing devastation to local downtown shopping areas throughout the county. While that event didn't devastate Oakland's shopping since we had none, it nonetheless sent a powerful message to the then mayor and politicians of Oakland with regard to the future and how this village should be developed and serve its wildly expanding population.

In addition to the above, there is another critically important dimension that directly affected the destruction of downtown Oakland. Specifically, it was the views and attitudes of the times embraced by the nation and by the citizenry of Oakland. Although today we truly revere things that are old, particularly old buildings as they speak to our history and heritage, that simply was not the case or attitude then. The 1950's was the period of post WW II when America ruled the world. Nuclear energy was on the near horizon and America's march into progress was the rally cry of the day. Out with the old, in with the new. And Oakland's downtown was considered as old or more specifically, dispensable. If one was to consider that the buildings, homes and hotels in downtown Oakland date to about 1895, they were only 65 years old in 1960. Although they were the stuff of heritage, they weren't antiques. And they weren't modern: They were made of wood and supported by hand hewn beams and worse, they weren't shinny new, glass enclosed buildings reflecting the 'progress at any price' mantra of the day. As a point of comparison, this writer's home is 63 years old and I do not consider it as old. And sure as hell, it's not dispensable.

It's fair to suggest that an evil brew and confluence of malfactors in Oakland was emerging to begin the devastation our downtown. These factors were: An exploding population in a town with no shopping, Oakland joining the rest of the world with the pending arrival of Route 208, a downtown composed mostly of 'old' wooden buildings and a populist attitude of progress at any price. Add to the mix the fact that Oakland either had or, for a price for the right builder/bidder, could have significant space to assuage the shopping needs of a growing population. And to the then mayor when he looked at the retail devastation in the county caused by the shopping malls, it was clear to him as to what was needed to be done.

First, we needed stores. But not clustered along narrow streets as in the format of the devastated towns of Bergen County. We also needed parking and lots of it for the shoppers as that was a significant contributor to the declining downtowns. We needed a large variety of different types of stores to attract and keep shoppers while allowing the retailers to prosper. And, most importantly, all of this had to be centrally located. As the devil looks over the earth for souls, so too did politicians of the mid 1950's fondle the map of downtown Oakland looking for space to have or space to create....destroy the old to build the new. The answer to the Oakland politicians' dream was the newly minted concept of strip malls that supplied all of the key elements for the salvation of this borough. And so it was that in the short space of less than 10 years, Oakland went from no shopping to having no fewer than four large strip malls. And in doing so, our downtown was virtually destroyed.

Here's how it was done and what was destroyed all in the name of progress.

The first order of official town business in 1957 was to have a supermarket in Oakland to feed our growing multitudes. And not just a supermarket, but an additional variety of stores as well. This requires space particularly if customer parking was a mandate as noted above. These factors combine to equal Oakland's very first strip mall. In that year

we welcomed the Grand Union to town in what was to be later known as the Sears Shopping Center.

It's location, adjacent to and behind the Ponds Church initially seems odd. But not so when one considers that the entire 10 acres on the strip mall was once owned by the Ponds Church which established itself at its current location in 1924. Apparently, it sold the property somewhere along the line thus permitting the development of the strip mall behind it. While all would seem well, the then mayor was not fully pleased. In an incredible show of hubris two years prior on January 30, 1955 Mayor Potash made a presentation to the Elders of the Ponds Church. His agenda was to have the church building demolished and purchase the land because it was in the way of the soon-to-be new strip mall. He offered an alternative site in town as a swap. The Elders listened as politely as they could and after he left, immediately initiated plans to expand the church to its present size. Literally, thank God.

A critical point here is that the development of this new strip mall in 1957 consumed the last and only vacant property in the center of Oakland. Any further additions to the inventory of retail stores in our community would have to be at the expense of what was already here, ie, our cultural and architectural heritage. The first shoe of the destruction of downtown Oakland had dropped with more to soon come. And it didn't take long as clearly, Oakland's new strip mall was a success. More, newer and bigger were the by-words of the day. The vultures of development and the gods of progress descended upon our village with invitation and welcome of our then elected officials. But where would they strike?

The nearest and obvious prime meat for development on Ramapo Valley Road was the property of the Oakland Military Academy, an Oakland Victorian architectural icon founded by John Sarcka in the 1930's. He purchased the property from the Calder family who had developed a much smaller (but substantial) home into the huge Calderwood, a residence and hotel. But here's where it gets interesting.

The Oakland Military Academy was quite successful serving primarily the male children of diplomats. It was a military-oriented school from the early grades through high school and included excellent horsemanship training with complete barn facilities. Due to its success, it in turn needed additional space for barracks and for classroom training. As a result it began to successfully acquire almost every building adjacent to the Academy property and even a few that weren't.

After purchasing the Calderwood, Sarcka purchased the revered Oakland Inn on the Southeast corner of Ramapo Valley Road and Yawpo Avenue for use as barracks and classrooms. With only two exceptions he then purchased every Victorian home on the east side of Ramapo Valley Road between Yawpo and Maple Avenue. But he needed even more space. He then acquired the Sanders property located on the North side of Yawpo Avenue behind the current Bank of America building. It was a choice move as two old, 2 story wooden apartment buildings were located on the property. They were perfect for classes and barracks. And when the old Oakland Firehouse was no longer fit

for service, he sought to acquire it for the Academy as it was originally located in what is now the parking lot of the Copper Tree Mall across from the current home of the OVFD Company 1 firehouse. The Academy also owned a large house on the West side of Ramapo Valley Road located where the current Oakland Drugs is situated. It was called the Penny House. It also owned much of the property up to Page Drive.

And so it was that the Oakland Military Academy owned virtually all of downtown Oakland on the eastern side of Ramapo Valley Road and a bit on the West side as well. And it had the open spaces of a parade grounds and football field in addition. Hence the Academy property literally contained everything that a developer and politician could ask for: Massive space, a perfect location, 'old', disposable buildings and potential tenants clamoring for an opportunity to move to or expand in Oakland. But what's a politician and developer to do since it was a successful private property? Lust and greed know no bounds.

This writer is compelled to add a legal caveat here. What follows a first hand verbal account of the event that led to the demise of the Oakland Military Academy. And it is from a person who got his information directly from John Sarcka: Sarcka's lips to his ears and his lips to my ears. His narrative to me described just how the Oakland Military Academy was unwillingly forced out of Oakland, the destruction of the Academy with ALL of the buildings it owned and the subsequent development of the Copper Tree Mall in its place.

It seems that shortly after the development of the first Oakland strip mall behind the Ponds Church, The Oakland Military Academy suddenly began to receive building inspections by the borough for plumbing, safety, fire, electrical, and so forth. We know them as building and safety code violations. Although Sarcka fixed the deficiencies, the repairs never seemed to be satisfactory and further deficiencies were even discovered. To a certain and very minor extent, some of the deficiencies in the many buildings were understandable as each structure was built prior to 1900. But the volume of them, the suddenness of their discovery and the frequency of being cited was, let's just say, very highly unusual particularly since Sarcka had great position and stature in Oakland at the time. The cost of the repairs to the many and growing number of code violations became massive and on-going and the costs were becoming prohibitive. Sarcka is quoted as asking why, "why are they doing this to me? What do they want and what do they want me to do?" The answer was simply that 'they' just may have wanted him to sell out and move his academy someplace else. It was in the way of progress.

I ask the reader to reflect upon the fact and implications that the Oakland Military Academy owned virtually all of downtown Oakland on the East side of Ramapo Valley Road. If the Academy is sold, abandoned and destroyed, so is each of every building that it owned and it owned most of downtown Oakland. And that's precisely what happened.

The Oakland Military moved to Orange County, NY. Each building owned by the academy was destroyed, moved or 'accidentally' burned down. And Oakland's downtown

was devastated as a result. So much and too much of our architectural history and heritage was sacrificed for a strip mall and a parking lot.

But the vultures and politicians weren't done yet in the destruction of our heritage. There were more malls to build and more parking spaces to create; more sacrificial offerings to the gods of progress.

Immediately adjacent to the brand new Copper Tree Mall were 2 fine Victorian houses coupled with a large expanse of property. They were the Nielsen House and the Kestler House and they impeded the march of progress. They had to go because another strip mall had to be built. And so it was that a new strip mall was built, the A&P came to Oakland and these fine houses on Ramapo Valley Road succumbed in the process.

And finally, there is the unkindest, heritage-destroying cut of all, one inflicted upon Oakland's architectural heritage by one of our own, Art Seele.

In the early 1960's, Mr. Seel was no longer a young man. For many years he owned the iconic and famous Seels Restaurant and Bar, a building whose roots extended back to about 1890 when it was first a private home and then a small hotel. It evolved into a bar and grille and adjacent to it was the locally famous Campus Spa ice cream parlor, a form predecessor to the Wigwam. It was located on the Northeast corner of Yawpo Avenue and Ramapo Valley Road. The destruction that was taking place in our beloved Oakland apparently gave him the idea and 'permission' that it was OK if he joined in the sacrificial orgy occurring in our downtown. Besides, it was time for him to retire and to assist in that endeavor, he wanted an on-going source of income.....rental income.

The answer to his retirement income plan was.....You guessed it.....Another strip mall. At first, he built his strip mall behind his bar but apparently that didn't work. So, he demolished his iconic bar and grill in favor of parking spaces and re-opened his bar where Pete and John's paint store is currently located.

At this point, you just might be asking about what's left to destroy of downtown Oakland in the name of progress. Unfortunately, there's more and most are Victorian houses sacrificed on the alter of commerce.

First there is the 1795 Becker House. Well, it seems that an Oakland politician heard the siren call of profit and development and eagerly approved the destruction of that house in favor of an Exxon gas station on the corner of Courthouse Place and Ramapo Valley Road. As if Oakland needed yet another gas station....Then there was the Victorian home next to the McNomee house. The front of it was sacrificed to Ralph's Pizza in the 1960's. But that was not enough as the entire house was destroyed in favor of a bank building that now stands in its stead. And then there was/is the Victorian house currently next to Oakland Drugs and recessed back almost behind the current Lukoil gas station. At one time it was curb side on Ramapo Valley Road. But, it seems that the then gas station owners needed to expand and also wanted more parking space. So, again you guessed it,

the house was literally picked up and moved away from the street to the point that it's mostly obscured today.

In the 1990's the ghost of David C. Bush witnessed the destruction of his home on Ramapo Valley Road located immediately across the tracks from his railroad station. Over the years it changed hands several times and served many businesses until finally, it was razed. The property lay fallow until, yes, a developer decided that yet another strip mall was needed in Oakland. And so a new Walgreens, Starbucks and yet another bank were built upon the ashes of the farm and homestead of Mr. David C. Bush.

Where there wasn't destruction, there was the frontal modification of our classic homes on Ramapo Valley Road during the late 1950's and early 1960's. Specifically, the ancestral McNomee home, currently the ReMax Real Estate office, had its beautiful front porch torn off to add 2, single story cinder block stores in place of it.

But alas, fellow lovers of old Oakland, the most severe insult to our most beloved downtown Oakland is saved for last.

The year was 1957 and Oakland's population was exploding. We definitely needed a larger post office to replace the tiny one on Ramapo Valley Road. And, of course, it just had to be located in our downtown area to serve the future throngs that were going to visit the envisioned strip malls. Oakland's then leading politician looked around to find a suitable location for a new post office.....something that was just old and disposable and something that Oakland didn't have to either purchase or condemn. Eureka! Sitting there under the noses of our town officials was the original 1872 Oakland railroad station built by the residents of Oakland on land donated to Oakland.

It fit every criteria for official disposability and destruction on the altar of newness and progress: It was 'old', rail service was seriously declining, it was owned by Oakland and, best yet, it sat on land owned by Oakland as the land was donated to Oakland by David C. Bush. It didn't get any better for our town officials of the day.

And so it was that the original Oakland railroad station of 1872, the edifice that singularly defined Oakland as a geo-political entity, put Oakland on the map and created our downtown area, was doomed to be replaced by a singularly ugly, single story building to serve as both our new post office and as a railroad ticket agency. It was so ugly as to offend the eye of anyone who had even just one scintilla of architectural taste and sensibility. To add insult to injury, that monstrosity itself lasted only about 25 years before it too was demolished. Now, the land is vacant and its vacancy stands out in our downtown like a missing front tooth. As a footnote, while our railroad station was literally in the midst of being demolished, a local newspaper reporter asked the then mayor of his thoughts. He responded that "Perhaps this just might be a mistake." Unbelievable but true!

So, there you have it. In the short space of less than 10 years from 1957, the downtown of Oakland went from the valley of homes to the vast wasteland of strip malls: From a

Victorian architectural heritage that could challenge the best in America to a disjointed mix of remnants of the former glory combined with faceless cinder block retail structures.

And in conclusion , I'll say it again: The destruction of downtown Oakland was initiated and caused by a singular lack of vision of biblical proportions by our elected officials and then sacrificed upon the altar of 'progress'. Remaining today is just enough to remind us daily of what used to be and the tragedy that ensued to permit what occurred. Is anybody angry yet?