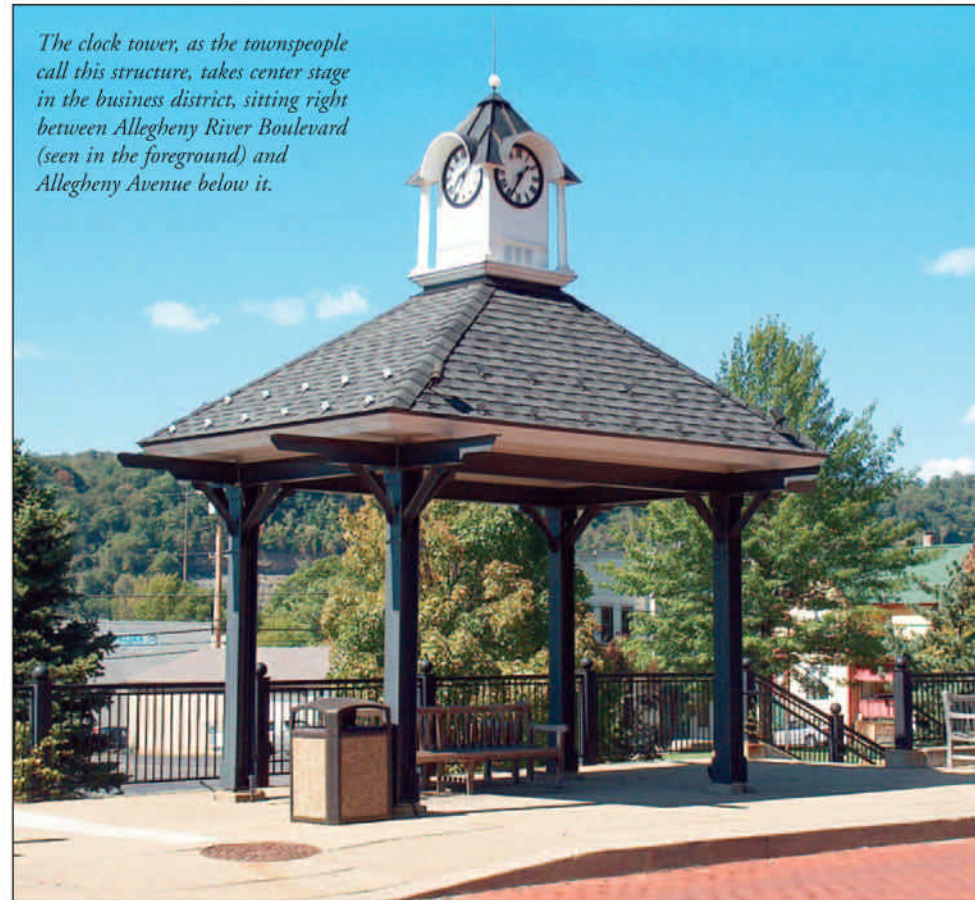


OAKMONT

A THRIVING
RIVERSIDE TOWN
WITH A RICH
HISTORY

BY JENNIFER BAILS

The clock tower, as the townspeople call this structure, takes center stage in the business district, sitting right between Allegheny River Boulevard (seen in the foreground) and Allegheny Avenue below it.



Oakmont's old-fashioned charm, historic sites, and wide variety of shopping and dining delights draw thousands of visitors each year to the quaint riverside borough in the lower Allegheny Valley. But the community's small town values and character are perhaps its greatest assets, making Oakmont a truly singular place to live and work.

"We maintain that Mayberry-style of community," says Mayor Bob Fescemyer, referring to the idyllic fictional town in rural North Carolina that was the setting for the 1960s sitcom *The Andy Griffith Show*. "People love it here and join together in giving back to their town."

Oakmont was incorporated as a municipality in 1889, but actually got its start in 1816 when a farmer named Michael Bright established his homestead on a 234-acre tract of land he bought 15 miles northeast of Pittsburgh. The borough that was to become Oakmont took its name from a landmark tree on Bright's property, as his deed description reads: "Beginning at the black oak on the bank of the Allegheny River ..."

1903 improvements to the area's rail service made traveling from Oakmont to Pittsburgh much easier, and the Oakmont railroad station became a popular stop.

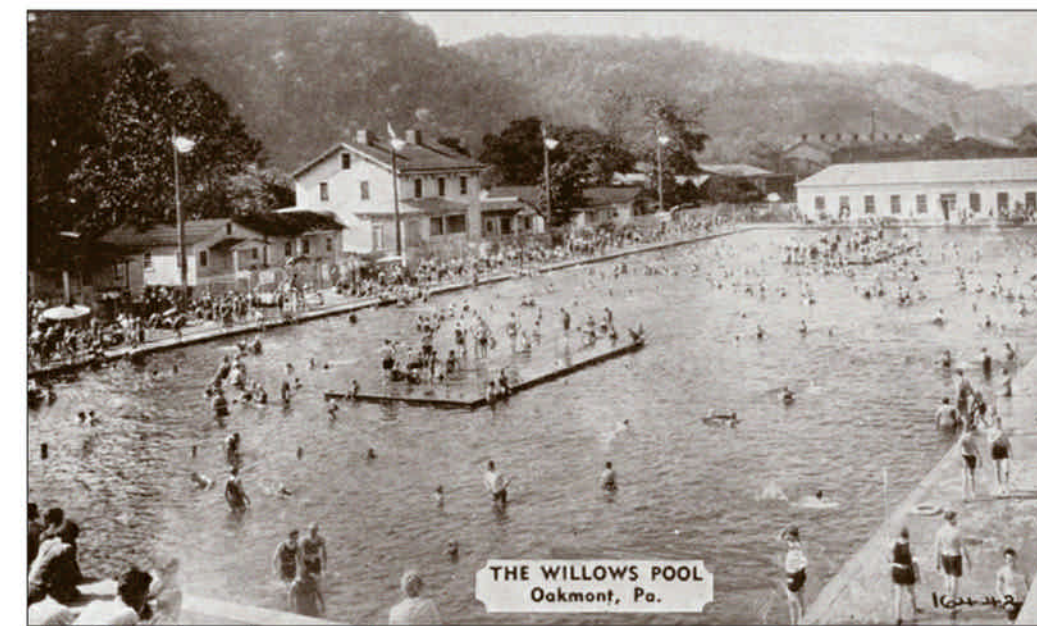


Oakmont grew as other settlers joined the Bright family, gradually transforming from an agrarian to a semi-residential, semi-industrial community once the Allegheny Valley Railroad was extended through the heart of town.

In 1903—the same year that steel tycoon H.C. Fownes conceived the world-famous Oakmont Country Club—rail service linked together East Liberty and Shadyside with Oakmont, giving residents better access to the city and making the community a summer recreation area very popular with Pittsburgh residents.

Resort cottages and tents lined the river and visitors flocked to town during the warm months to swim and boat in the Allegheny. The Willows Pool—large enough to host canoe races and the site of the annual Miss Pittsburgh Beauty Pageant—opened in 1926, becoming a center of summertime activity until it closed in 1972. The nearby Oakmont Yacht Club, visited twice by President Franklin Roosevelt, is recognized as the nation's oldest inland yacht club.

Proximity to the river also drew industry to Oakmont—most notably the Wm. B. Scaife and Sons Co., a steel and iron workings facility, and Edgewater Steel Co., which became the town's largest employer. Today plans are underway to revitalize the waterfront by building residential townhouses and prime space for light commercial business on the former Edgewater property.



The Willows Pool opened in 1926 and was a center of summertime activity until it closed in 1972.



Canoeing on the river near the Hulton Bridge was one of the activities that made Oakmont such a popular recreation spot in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The Hulton Bridge, named for early settler Jonathan Hulton, was opened and dedicated in 1909, linking together Oakmont and Harmar, and further opening the community to economic growth and development. The vintage two-lane span attracted national attention in 1991 when the steel superstructure was painted lilac as part of a repair project.

During World War I, the Fifteenth United States Engineers' regiment trained at "Camp Gaillard" on a farm just east of town before being deployed to Europe to rebuild railroads destroyed in the conflict. Oakmont also made a notable contribution to the Second World War, with the town's young men leaving to fight overseas and local factories producing mortar shells, bombs, and other materials vital to the defense effort.

By 1950, the population of Oakmont had swelled to roughly its current population of about 7,000 people, and the street map of the town from that decade looks almost the same as it does today.

Two streets—Allegheny Avenue and Allegheny River Boulevard—still run parallel through the center of Oakmont's vibrant retail corridor, separated by the train tracks.

For many years, the shops along the red-brick boulevard were mainly grocery markets and general stores where residents went to buy goods that met their everyday needs.

Now Oakmont has become a regional shopping destination with specialty stores that sell luxury wares that can't be found in any national chain or mall.

The business district's gas lights, free parking, and clock tower transport visitors back to quieter, less hectic times. A landscaped walking trail built by



Quaint shops and restaurants serve not only the residents of Oakmont, but visitors who come in to spend time shopping and dining.



Tempting taste treats fill the glass cases at the Oakmont Bakery.



Beautiful lamps cast their glow at The Guiding Light.



The town library, which dates back to 1901, is one of the original libraries built by Andrew Carnegie.



A converted Victorian house is the perfect setting for Bloomers floral and gift shop.

the Oakmont Garden Club that threads its way along Allegheny River Boulevard also makes shopping a memorable experience.

"It's so quaint here," says Catherine Szalinski, owner of Catherina women's clothing store. "Oakmont is one of the few areas in Pittsburgh where we continue to have mom-and-pop stores. I think the merchants really work together in keeping it special."

Stroll down the tree-lined boulevard from Catherina and you will find other distinctive clothing shops such as Mia Boutique, featuring lingerie; Traditions of Oakmont, carrying men's clothes; and Lucy shoes—stores that attract shoppers from as far away as Sewickley, Mt. Lebanon, and Kittanning, Szalinski says.

"The wonderful mix of retailers that is down here is definitely a reason to come into our little town," she says.

You can stop in and watch award-winning goldsmith Robert Hallett craft jewelry in his studio or browse through an unparalleled collection of hand-painted Italian ceramics at Ciao Italia. At gift shops like The Quail's Tale and The Picker Fence, you'll find items as charming as the shops' names.

With Oakmont Country Club's world-famous golf course just a mile or so away, it's no surprise to find Fit Fore All Days offering ladies' golf apparel and casual clothes, and Golf August Pro Shops, owned by Bob Erickson, a teaching professional certified by the United States Golf Teachers Federation.

Visitors also can join the locals for a family-style hot breakfast at What's Cookin' at Caseys or enjoy Italian and contemporary favorites at Hoffstot's Café Monaco.

And of course, no visit to Oakmont is complete without a trip to the landmark Oakmont Bakery,

Right: Specialty shops abound throughout the town, like this one that caters to lovers of mystery books.

where oodles of mouth-watering pastries, cookies, and cakes tempt even the most iron-willed dieter.

Carol Kinkela says deciding to locate her contemporary clothing store Carabella in Oakmont a decade ago "was the best thing I ever did," mostly because of the camaraderie she shares with her fellow merchants and the support she receives from the residents. "People just poke their heads in to say hello or just come and hang out," she says.

In addition to fabulous shopping with personalized service, Oakmont offers unique opportunities for visitors to taste the rich history of Western Pennsylvania.

The Dr. Thomas R. Kerr Memorial Museum is a late 19th century, Queen Anne style home on Delaware Avenue that functioned as the family residence and medical office of its namesake doctor. His daughter, Virginia Kerr, bequeathed the home to the borough in 1994 to be used as a museum in memory of her father. Restored to its original glory,

the house contains an extensive collection of memorabilia and documents and provides a rare glimpse into the lives of a professional family at the turn of the century.

More than a half-dozen historic churches such as the Oakmont United Methodist Church built in 1916 and the Dormition of the Holy Theotokos Greek Orthodox Church (best known for its annual food festival) continue to play an active role in community life.

Another neighborhood treasure is The Oaks, a gloriously refurbished 430-seat, single-screen movie house and one of the last remaining independently owned theaters in the region. It was built in 1941 and features original art deco architectural elements such as a stepped ceiling and decorative oak leaves that adorn the side walls.



The Oakmont Carnegie Library opened its doors at its present location in 1901 and remains one of the town's most cherished resources. It recently underwent a \$2 million renovation to expand the historically registered building and make it more accessible to people with disabilities and mothers with strollers.

"We have one of the original Carnegie libraries, and it is absolutely breathtaking," says Kaaren



Well-kept houses from the turn of the century line the shaded streets in the heart of town.

Amodeo, a longtime "Oakmonter" and vice president of the chamber of commerce.

Amodeo describes her community as a close-knit town that revels in its smallness—and its sameness.

"People want to preserve the small-town feel," Amodeo says. "It is the comfort of knowing if I lose my way that somebody is going to tell me where to go, or if my children are locked out of the house that I know the neighbors will take care of them. We are like an extended family."

Many new young families are being drawn to Oakmont today for its safety and the excellent reputation of its school system. Riverview School District was formed in 1972 through the merger of Oakmont and Verona schools, marking the end of one of the greatest—and at times, most bitter—athletic rivalries in the state.

People of all generations who grow up in Oakmont share fond memories of holiday and Little League parades and Christmas-time light-up nights complete with free horse-and-buggy rides



Above: A charming courtyard serves as an inviting entryway to several long-standing Oakmont businesses.



Along Hulton Road, stately homes feature expansive lawns. This one, built around 1863, once housed a young ladies' finishing school that Helen Keller, along with her teacher Annie Sullivan, attended in 1893, when she was 13.

and kettle corn. Riverside Park along the banks of the Allegheny and a beautifully secluded nature reserve called Dark Hollow Woods provide magical spaces for children to play.

Oakmont is locked into a mile-square area with no room to expand, bounded on the west by the Allegheny River, the north by a stream called Falling Springs Run, the south by Plum Creek, and the east by the Pennsylvania Turnpike. But that doesn't mean the tiny, self-contained town isn't looking to improve, says Fescemyer, who retired after 37 years as a police officer in the borough before being elected mayor two years ago.

Priorities for the borough include redevelopment of the Edgewater Steel site, controlling increasing traffic problems in town, and the future of the Hulton Bridge, which PennDOT is seeking to widen, Fescemyer says.

Dependable zoning ordinances and the uncommon pride that Oakmont residents take in their town and property will guide these changes and help to maintain quality of life in the community well into the next century.

"I wouldn't want to be anywhere else," Fescemyer says. SA