

Prosperity took detour on freeway in the '60s

Oak Park was built about the turn of the century as a suburb where homeowners could avoid city taxes.

It became an entertainment and shopping center because an amusement park named Joyland — complete with a roller coaster, swimming pool, dance hall, concessions and vaudeville shows — sat in McClatchy Park and attracted thousands of Sacramentans each weekend. Two streetcar lines ran from downtown to Joyland.

Shops, theaters and restaurants sprang up near the popular amusement park and 35th Street became the Florin Mall of its day, competing with downtown Sacramento as the second shopping district in the area.

The place became so famous that the city erected a steel sign over 35th Street to proclaim the entrance: "Oak Park," recalled Clarence L. Azavedo, a former Sacramento mayor who owned a dress shop on 35th Street for more than 30 years.

Joyland closed because of noise complaints in the 1930s, but the shopping district was so well established it survived and thrived for another two decades, Azavedo said.

Oak Park was a middle-class neighborhood until 1956, when the city's first redevelopment project started tearing down tenements and cheap houses along what is now Capitol Mall. The impoverished people who had lived there fled into Oak Park and Del Paso Heights because those neighborhoods offered the cheapest housing in the area, said Azavedo, who was mayor at the time.

The economies of Oak Park were changing by the time the Highway 99 freeway was

completed in 1962. But the freeway changed things more and helped kill the neighborhood. It cut Oak Park off from the more-affluent Curtis Park and strangled commerce along 35th Street, Broadway and Stockton Boulevard because the freeway ramps were placed so inconveniently for Oak Park that



Proud symbol: Sign marked entrance.

motorists drove past, on to the shopping centers emerging in the suburbs.

Dean Gordon Schaber of the McGeorge School of Law, largest landowner in Oak Park, said he was disappointed when the Oak Park off-ramp was placed at 12th Avenue, several residential blocks away from the school and the successful stores that existed at the time. The highway designers, Schaber said, believed there was too much traffic merging at the equivalent of Alhambra Boulevard and T Street — where Highways 99 and 50 and Interstate 80 join — to have an Oak Park ramp any closer.

Oak Park died quickly after the freeway

was built.

And as other areas developed, the middle class began moving out of Oak Park — whites to South Land Park, blacks to Meadowview — and the poor moved in.

At the same time, according to Vincent "Ted" Thompson, an undertaker active in the Oak Park Merchants Association for 30 years, police started turning their backs on minor offenders. That set the stage for drinking and gambling to occur in the open, prostitutes to pop up on street corners and after-hours clubs to set a new tone for Oak Park, he said.

In the mid-1960s, the radical Black Panther Party marched down 35th Street and opened headquarters in a vacant storefront. Racial unrest preoccupied Oak Park for the next several years. There were small riots with fires started by Molotov cocktails, store windows broken, arrests and injuries. Tension built to June 15, 1969, when rooftop snipers opened fire on the police, then the police raided the Black Panthers' headquarters.

Four days later, Azavedo announced that business in Oak Park was so bad he was moving his 80-clerk shop to Fruitridge. The next day, owners of four other stores said they were pulling out of the neighborhood, too.

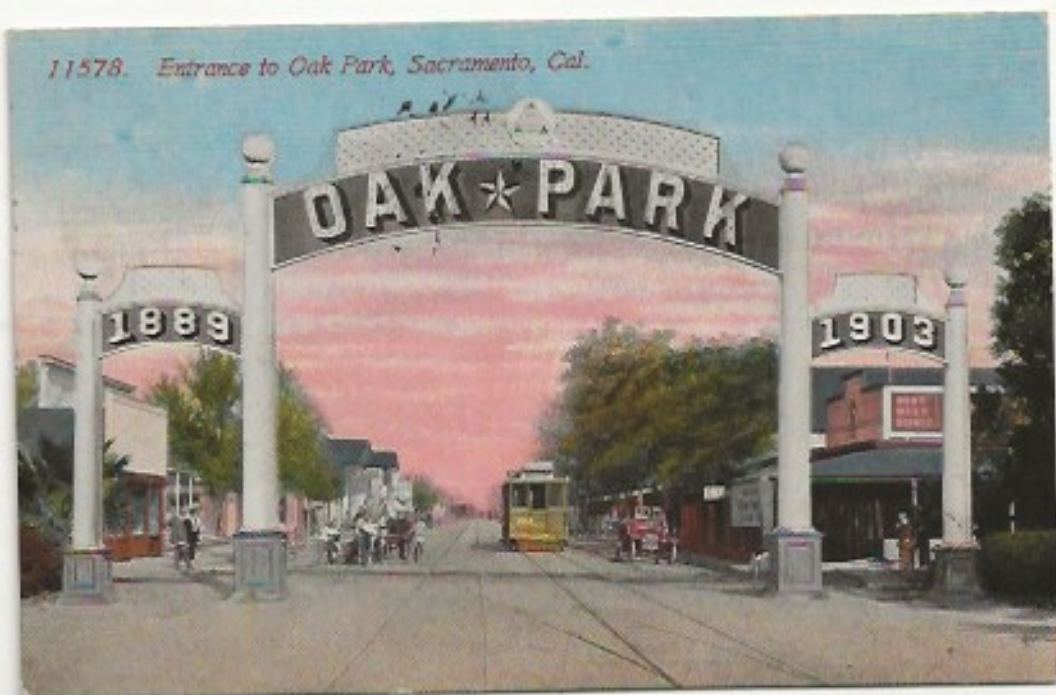
The once-mainstream street changed quickly after the stores and the shoppers left. Empty shops became vacant lots, then public housing projects. Only a few stores, most of them small "mom and pop" operations, remain within the poverty that controls Oak Park today. □

— Thom Akeman

Oak Park, Sacramento, Cal.



11578. Entrance to Oak Park, Sacramento, Cal.



U. S. 901. Sacramento, Cal. Oak Park.



BRITTON & BLY, PHOTOGRAPHERS, SAN FRANCISCO 752.

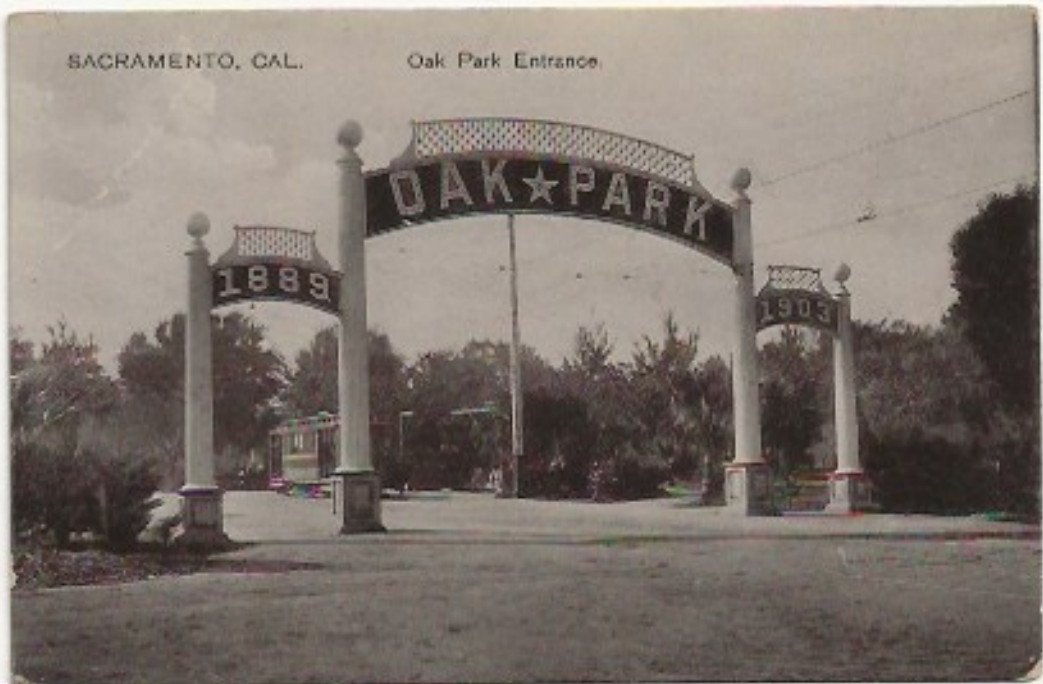


Entrance to Oak Park, Sacramento, Cal.

565 - ENTRANCE TO OAK PARK, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA.



SACRAMENTO, CAL. Oak Park Entrance



2154 - WERNER RAILWAY, OAK PARK, SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA.
RESIDENCE DISTRICT IN BACKGROUND.



THE ENTRANCE TO OAK PARK,
SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA.



INTERIOR SCENE OF OAK PARK AT SACRAMENTO, CALIFORNIA.

