

## The Birth and Growth of Cranford Part V:

### From the Great Depression until Sunny Acres

by Vic Bary

The failure of Lincoln Park to take hold as anticipated between 1914 and 1929 leads us into the period of the Great Depression, a period during which business activity in general, and home building in particular, took a nose dive. In his 1973 Cranford Historical Society oral history interview, local real estate agent Thomas MacKeekin said house sales all but evaporated at the onset of the Great Depression, and he and other real estate agents were forced to eke out a meager existence on the commissions generated by rental placements. Commission were generally 50% of the first month's rent. Since the average monthly rent was \$50- \$60, these commissions were pretty slim.

As the Great Depression began to run its course, some residential development began to take place. In its October 6, 1938 issue, the *Cranford Citizen* reported that building permit receipts the prior month had reached their highest monthly value since 1929 (although much of this was driven by the English Village apartments development). In May 1937, the first houses in the Osceola Park housing development had been started.

Osceola Park - 1937: Bounded by Munsee Drive on the south, the Rahway River on the west, and Centennial Drive on the east, this development called for 200 Cape Cod and Colonial style homes to be built on 120' by 50' lots carved out of a 32-acre portion of the late Thomas A. Sperry's Osceola Farm estate. The homes were to have attached garages and were "oil air conditioned". (However, "air conditioned" as used here meant filtered forced air heating, not air conditioning as we understand the term today.)

Development was managed by Sperry's son Thomas and by Clipper Homes. The houses themselves were to be built by local builder and scout master Ben Smith. The October 6, 1938 issue of the *Cranford Citizen* carried two pages of photographs and advertisements for the development, offering colonials from \$5,750 and up, with a \$550 down payment required and a mortgage payment of \$41.72 per month. An accompanying article said 17 homes had been completed, with 12 more projected to be finished by the end of the year.



By 1940, 50 of the planned 200 homes had been built. WW II delayed completion of the remaining homes (presumably due to manpower shortages and strategic materials unavailability).

Heathermeade Hills - 1939: On the north side of town, on what had been 27 acres of the Ludlow Farm, property developer Thomas V. Albert initiated Heathermeade Hills. It was bounded on the south by Brookside Place, on the east by Beech Street (which had been extended by Albert), on the north by Makaton Road, and on the west by Gallows Hill Road. The first 32 of 110 planned custom-built Colonial style homes were completed before the U.S. entered WW II. The homes were built on lots 50' x110' (sometimes 120'). Assistant Township Engineer Patrick Grall did the lot layouts on weekends and during periods between Township employment, taking full advantage of natural drainage.



Thomas V. Albert was a very active Cranford developer. His developments included those on Centennial Avenue, Columbia Avenue and 6th Street, and apartments on 1 3/4 acres of the former Kaltenbach estate (see "The Birth and Growth of Cranford Pat IV", Fall issue of *The Mill Wheel*). According to the May 25, 1939 *Citizen and Chronicle*, the Albert family themselves lived within the development in the old Ludlow farmstead, which he had converted into a combination Georgian and Regency dwelling with a 3-car garage. The next major development in Cranford would be "Sunny Acres", commenced in mid-1940 as a unique undertaking by Sears Roebuck and Company. It was so unique in Sears history of home building activities, that it will be treated as a single topic in the next issue.

Sources:

1. Burditt Index, various
2. *Citizen and Chronicle*, various
3. *Cranford Citizen and Chronicle*, 5/29/36
4. MacKeekin, Thomas, Oral History, Cranford Historical Society, 3/27/73
5. Strazdon, Maureen, "Know Your Neighbor(hood)", presentation at Cranford Public Library, April 14, 2014