

## THEMATIC NARRATIVES

### *THEME: AGRICULTURE*

*SUBTHEMES: DAIRY FARMING; FRUIT GROWING; GENERAL PURPOSE FARMING; SHEEP RAISING; SPECIALIZED AGRICULTURE; SUBSISTENCE FARMING*

Most of the immigrants to southern Michigan in the 1820s and 1830s came to establish farms. For the first few decades farmers grew crops and raised livestock to provide for the needs of their own families. When the land was first cleared corn was the easiest crop to grow, but when the land became better cultivated wheat was the preferred food crop. In 1850 Oakland County produced 586,346 bushels of wheat. Other crops were corn, oats, rye, beans, peas, potatoes, barley, hay, buckwheat, and fruit. Farm products also included maple sugar, honey, milk, cheese, butter, eggs, beef, pork, and mutton. Among the early Avon Township settlers who developed large and successful farms, probably the most noted was Linus Cone, who purchased eighty acres of land in section 33 in 1826. In 1877 Samuel Durant wrote of Cone: "His experience was remarkable, inasmuch as he cut the first timber and made the first improvements on his farm, and lived long enough upon it to see it made the best regulated and finest improved farm anywhere in his locality."<sup>4</sup> Cone wrote articles for the agricultural press, including *Michigan Farmer* and *Genesee Farmer*, and served as president of the Oakland County Agricultural Society.

After the Civil War, Oakland County agriculture became more productive and more commercial. Improvements in farm machinery boosted productivity. Better roads and most importantly railroads made it possible to ship cash crops to urban centers before the food spoiled. Oakland County, one of the first counties in Michigan to be settled and cleared, led the state in farming. Agriculture grew almost steadily between 1850 and 1900. In Avon Township the number of bushels of wheat, corn, grains, and potatoes increased from 107,422 in 1854 to 248,999 in 1884. Wheat and wool were the county's leading cash crops. Wheat acreage peaked in 1870 and remained high until after 1900. Between 1850 and 1900 Oakland County farmers raised over 100,000 sheep each year. Sheep raising was particularly well suited to the hilly landscape of Avon Township.

Three leading farms of this time period illustrate the change in agricultural production. Joshua Van Hoosen's Spring Brook Farm represents a pioneer family's self sufficient farm that shifted to commercial farming. Van Hoosen married Sarah Taylor, granddaughter of Lemuel Taylor, Sr., and bought out the remaining heirs to the Taylor family farm. Van Hoosen added acreage until the farm totaled approximately 270 acres. In 1874 he built a new barn 101 feet long, reputedly the longest barn in Oakland County. Writing in 1877, Durant described the farm as one of the finest in the county. Yet in her *Chronicle of Van Hoosen Centenary Farm*, Sarah Van Hoosen Jones described her grandfather's farm as independent, producing most of the family's food. Her grandmother traded butter and eggs for tea, coffee, salt, and sugar. The farm's primary crop was wheat; other crops included corn, oats, potatoes, and apples. Joshua began his livestock operations with sheep, adding cattle, then

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel W. Durant, *History of Oakland County, Michigan* (Philadelphia: L.H. Everts & Co., 1877), 132.

hogs. Sarah Van Hoosen kept the hens. Joshua sold his crops for cash, but his crops were diverse and the family was self-sufficient to a large degree.

The Eureka and Overlook Fruit Farms offer a contrast. H.W. Ostrom established the Eureka Fruit Farm in 1870. The farm had 24 acres of bush berries with more varieties than any other farm in the township. Ostrom introduced the custom of taking berries to Detroit by team, avoiding commission men, carrying his own cashier, and selling directly to consumers. He employed eighty-five pickers at the height of the season and reputedly had one of the most profitable berry farms in the state. J.J. and Ella Snook purchased their 170 acre Overlook Fruit Farm in 1883. Although they did some general farming and raised stock, Overlook was noted particularly for fruit. The Snooks employed fifty to seventy pickers at harvest time.

The trend toward specialized cash crops continued after the turn of the century. Fruit farming remained strong, but wheat farming and sheep raising declined sharply in favor of a growing emphasis on dairy farming. Large commercial farms dominated Avon Township agriculture. The transformation of Van Hoosen Farm is instructive. After Joshua Van Hoosen died in 1894 his widow and daughters rented the farm to tenant farmers. When Sarah Van Hoosen died in 1921 she left the farm to her granddaughter, Sarah Van Hoosen Jones, who took over management six years later. With a masters degree in animal husbandry and doctorate in genetics, Sarah Van Hoosen Jones approached the farm scientifically. Starting with fifty head of Holstein cows, Jones built an award winning dairy farm with two hundred cows by 1944. Van Hoosen Farm became a major supplier of dairy products to the Detroit market. In 1933 Jones was the first woman in Michigan to be named a master farmer, and for nine years she was a Michigan Premier Breeder. After she retired from farming in 1952 Jones leased the farm to her farm manager, Morris Place. She willed the 350 acre farm to Michigan State University, which sold the property after Place's lease expired in 1976.

Meadow Brook Farm was established by James L. Higgins, who purchased the 320 acre Hubbel farm in September 1896. John Dodge bought the farm from Higgins in 1908. After John Dodge died in 1920 his widow, Matilda, married Alfred Wilson. The Wilsons built Meadow Brook Hall from 1926 to 1929, beginning a period of intensive development of the estate and farm that continued into the 1930s. Their award winning livestock operations included Guernsey cows, Belgian horses, Hampshire hogs, chickens, turkeys, and squab. The estate had grown to 1,400 acres and was still a working farm when the Wilsons gave it to Michigan State University in 1957. In 1959 the charter class enrolled at what is today Oakland University.

In 1902 D. M. Ferry and Company of Detroit bought approximately 568 acres in southeastern Avon Township, establishing Oakview Farm for their seed breeding and stock seed program. In 1912 Ferry bought an additional 113 acres for its experimental and trial gardens. The final addition of 169 acres during the 1920s enlarged Oakview Farm to 850 acres. The company built greenhouses, employee housing, a variety of barns for different purposes, and a four story cement block dry house for drying seeds. In 1930 Ferry consolidated with the C. C. Morse Company of San Francisco, becoming the Ferry-Morse Seed Company. By the 1940s the population of Avon Township had grown to the point where plants from home gardens

were cross pollinating with the company's plants. In 1944 Ferry-Morse sold all but the 113 acre parcel to Howard McGregor, Sr. for his Great Oaks Stock Farm (see below). They continued to operate the experimental and trial gardens until the 1950s, when they ended their Avon Township operation.

Parke, Davis, and Company of Detroit established its Parkedale Biological Farm on 340 acres in northeastern Avon Township in 1908. Over time the farm grew to more than 700 acres. At Parkedale the company raised horses, cattle, guinea pigs, rabbits, poultry, and monkeys for the production of biological medicines and vaccines. Farm crops included medicinal plants along with hay, alfalfa, corn, and other crops for stock feed. Barns and laboratories were designed for maximum cleanliness. In 1958 Parke-Davis began to sell or donate its farmland and replaced most of the farm buildings with offices and modern laboratories. In 1980 the Parke-Davis facility was annexed by the city of Rochester.

Howard McGregor, Sr. established Great Oaks Stock Farms on 320 acres northwest of Rochester in 1939. Subsequent additions, notably the Ferry-Morse acreage, brought the total acreage of Great Oaks to more than 1,000 by the mid-1940s. McGregor raised Aberdeen Angus beef cattle, primarily for breeding, and Guernsey dairy cattle. He used the Ferry-Morse Farm to grow stock feed. In 1968 McGregor donated a portion of his farm to build Crittenton Hospital, North Hill Elementary School, and McGregor Elementary School, selling the rest for development.

Although farming remained the basis of Avon Township's economy in the early twentieth century, overall farm production began a slow decline in 1900. The decline became more rapid during the land speculation of the 1920s, when suburban subdivisions multiplied. Despite the large commercial farms, the 229 farms in Avon Township in 1939 averaged sixty-five acres in size. After World War II commercial, industrial, and most of all residential development steadily replaced Avon Township's farmland. There is no commercial farming in Rochester Hills today, only gardens and a few horse stables for private use.

### *Evaluation Standards*

Until the mid-twentieth century the history of Avon Township is agricultural history more than anything else. Therefore properties that are significant under the theme of agriculture are significant under National Register Criterion A for their contribution to a pattern of events important to Avon Township history. Most of the property types that represent the agriculture theme are found under the broad category of agriculture and include barns, a cider mill, a corn crib, farms, farmsteads, a greenhouse, an ice house, a milk house, orchards, poultry houses, pumphouses, a root cellar, sheds, and silos. Domestic property types including single and multiple family houses may contribute to the agriculture theme when they are associated with other farm buildings or landscape features. A farmhouse alone is significant under the theme of agriculture only when it is associated with a farm of outstanding significance to the agricultural history of the township. Relatively few farm buildings other than farmhouses survive to represent the agricultural landscape that once constituted nearly the whole of Avon Township. Therefore most farm buildings that retain

the greater part of their historic appearance are considered significant. Most common are barns: a total of twenty-five buildings historically used as barns are extant in the survey area. This is likely the total or very close to the total for Rochester Hills. Twenty of these twenty-five are counted as contributing resources. Barns often have newer doors, which does not detract appreciably from their integrity. However a few barns, including two that were converted to houses, do not retain enough integrity to contribute to the theme. One early twentieth century barn has sufficient integrity to be a contributing resource but the former bungalow on the property has been altered beyond recognition, and the barn is an ordinary example not significant enough for individual designation.

*List of Associated Properties*

1597 N. Adams Rd.  
1841 Crooks Rd.  
3610 S. Livernois Rd.  
3901 W. Tienken Rd.  
Eli Bristol House, 1160 South Blvd.  
Linus and Mary Cone House, 1580 South Blvd.  
Corwin House, 1568 W. Avon Rd.  
Eureka Fruit Farm, 1021 Harding Ave.  
Ferry Court Historic District, Wayside Park  
Ferry-Morse Seed Farm, 2600 Club Dr.  
Frank Farm Historic District, E. Auburn Rd.  
George and Lizzie Jones Farm, 1365 W. Tienken Rd.  
Johnson House, 1705 Walton Blvd.  
Juengel Orchards Historic District, S. Rochester Rd.  
Meadow Brook Farms Historic District, Oakland University  
Potere Farm, 800 W. Avon Rd.  
Harry Serrell House, 3030 Crooks Rd.  
Stoney Creek Historic District  
Winkler Mill Pond Historic District  
Yates Cider Mill, 1950 E. Avon Rd.

THEME: ARCHITECTURE

Residential architecture dominates the survey area as it dominates the city as a whole. Most of the residential buildings surveyed are single family houses and associated outbuildings. None of the log houses that the settlers built in the earliest years survive. The first frame houses were built in Avon Township in the 1820s. Since then the vast majority of houses have been built of wood frame construction. Only 4 of approximately 190 (current or former) single family houses in the survey area are definitely brick masonry construction; one is built of stone. Some twentieth century houses use brick or stone veneer. Meadow Brook Hall is built of brick veneer over concrete.

The oldest house in Rochester Hills is the Nathaniel Millerd House in Stony Creek, reputedly the first frame house built in the village. The 1827 construction date, though from secondary