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Rustic charm, city conveniences

By John Willard

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QUAD-CITY TIMES

A 94-year-old barn is the centerpiece of Moline's Homewood, once a farm belonging to a prominent Quad-City family, and now one of the community's most desirable neighborhoods more than 40 years after it was developed.

Bounded by 49th and 70th streets and 34th Avenue and John Deere Road, the rolling, wooded enclave of handsome homes in a variety of styles retains much of the country charm known by Katherine Deere Butterworth, granddaughter of John Deere. She and her husband, William, operated the Homewood Farm on the site.

Among the farm buildings was the huge dairy barn at 4950 35th Ave., now the home of Playcrafters. The community theater group was given the barn in 1958 by the subdivision's developer, Dr. William Otis.

The barn, renovated and expanded over the years, not only hosts Playcrafters' performances but serves as a reminder of the days when cattle and horses grazed on the site. The suburban character attracts younger families as original property owners grow older and choose other housing options, said Paula Donis Nabb, an agent with Mel Foster Co.

"Whenever I am showing people homes, I always buzz them through Homewood. It's always been a stately, charming subdivision," she said.

Homes for sale in Homewood include a 37-year-old, three-bedroom brick ranch priced at \$155,000. Most homes in the neighborhood sell at prices ranging from \$170,000 to \$240,000, Nabb said, although one of the largest ones recently went for \$750,000.

Moline Alderman Dorothy Armstrong, whose 7th Ward encompasses Homewood, said the neighborhood's mix of people, convenience to shopping, and community pride make it a good place to live. "I rarely get any complaints from people in Homewood," she said.

Horses were still part of the scene when Bud Everett and his family moved to Homewood in 1971. Like other residents, he was attracted to the area because of its natural beauty. "We love the trees and the nicely maintained homes," said Everett one recent afternoon as he tended the impatiens and Japanese honeysuckle in his garden.

His neighbor, William Stoewer, likewise enjoys the towering oaks in the backyard of the Homewood ranch where he has lived for 40 years. He was the Moline city engineer when the plat of the subdivision's first addition, with 72 lots, was filed on Aug. 11, 1960. The first street to open was 49th Street. Over the next 40 years, 20 additions containing 450 lots were platted and offered to builders and individuals. Covenants spelled out home and lot sizes and other restrictions.

At one time, a homeowners association was envisioned, but it never was established, said Robert Alvine, a Moline lawyer, Otis's attorney and a former Homewood resident. Bridal paths and a swimming pool proposed for the southwest corner of 53rd Street and 34th Avenue also were part of the original concept, he said, but never were carried out.

He attributes the subdivision's success to the vision of Otis, an accomplished pilot and outdoorsman whom he describes as a "true renaissance man." The son of physicians, he earned a master's degree in aeronautical engineering from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a master's degree in business administration from Harvard.

When his physician brother, Frank Otis, died in a plane crash, he decided to carry on the family's tradition in medicine and earned his medical degree from Northwestern University's School of Medicine. He served as a medical doctor in the Army Air Corps and retired as a lieutenant colonel in the U.S. Air Force Reserve. He was a general practitioner in Moline for

40 years.

Because of his family's losses during the Great Depression, he invested in land, figuring it was safe. In 1957, he bought the Homewood Farm and established his residence in a home once occupied by the farm's manager.

He and Moline insurance man Joe Oakleaf formed Homewood Development Corp. with offices in the First National Bank building in Moline, to develop the farm into a subdivision at a time when new housing was in demand. Oakleaf handled much of the administrative legwork, often appearing before the city council, his son, John Oakleaf, recalls today.

One of the challenges, he said, was selling the merits of a planned unit development, in which lots were arranged to fit the curvature of the land instead of on streets forming a grid.

Otis died at the age of 89 in 1998, His son Alan Otis, who lives in Homewood in a home he built not far from his father's. He plans to sell 10 acres of undeveloped land for residential use.

His father, he said, was pleased with how Homewood turned out.

"It's an attractive subdivision, one that is not dated at all," he said.

John Willard can be contacted at (563) 383-2314 or jwillard@qctimes.com.



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