

## *Industry and Farms*

Through excellent leadership and planning by Village officials, Melrose Park could always be proud of its favorable climate for industry. It has made the Village the envy of many towns and villages in Illinois.

German immigrants who engaged in farming, dairy cattle and light industry settled the original prairie lands. North Avenue, the dividing line between Proviso and Leyden townships, was then the property line for the farms, which lined both sides of the road.

When the first railroad was built along the road now known as Lake Street, it allowed local farmers to ship their produce to the Chicago market each day. The settlement, which grew up around the railroad stop, was further enhanced by the arrival of immigrant artisans and mechanics to work in the Spring Works, which was established in 1869.



**Melrose Parker selling his farm grown vegetables in the early 1900's**

The Spring Works, at Main Street and Twenty-fifth Avenue, was destroyed three times by fire between 1873 and 1907. It later became the Chicago Tyre and Spring Works (1886), the Lathrope Steel and Coupling Company, and the National Malleable and Steel Castings Company; it eventually became the modern day corporation known as Midland-Ross.

For many years, farming continued in the "pepper patches." In 1906, the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad purchased a vast tract of land west of the Village and established their shops for maintaining equipment. Additional tracks were added to better serve the vast Lathrope Steel and Coupling Company, which had grown considerably. In 1926, Proviso Yards were expanded to

become the largest freight handling yards in the U.S. railroad industry at that time and still remains one of the largest in the country.

Village President Charles Wolf framed an ordinance in 1910 prohibiting industry in the residential portion of the Village. Through his foresight, the beautiful, tree-lined streets of Melrose Park were retained to attract the industrious people to this growing community.

In 1902, construction began on the Harbor Beltline RR to intersect with the Chicago & Northwestern RR and further enhance the Melrose Park area for industry. New industries that moved into the Village included Electric Engineering Equipment Company in 1910 and, in 1920, the Richardson Company. Through active research, the Richardson Company plant became the main supplier of battery casings and the foundation for the fledgling plastics industry.



**Proviso Yard workers in 1929; the RR Yards helped make Melrose an industry giant**

Lewis Roofing Supply Company was established in 1928, followed by the Dur-O-Lite Pencil Company in 1934. The truck farms along North Avenue became greenhouses, which supplied flower shops throughout the region.

Transportation and the friendly attitude of the community were also complimented by water furnished to the Village Water Works by artesian wells. In the late 1930's when water levels dropped in the Village wells, it became imperative that water be brought in from Lake Michigan.

Lack of interest by other area villages to solve the water problem prompted Melrose Park officials to construct and finance a 5-mile,

30-inch water supply line into Melrose Park. To finance the project, the Federal Government contributed \$344,789, the Defense Plant Corporation \$145,000 and Melrose Park \$150,000. The bond issue for Melrose Park's contribution was retired by sale of water. This substantial water supply in the Village of Melrose Park and the high density of inter and intra shippers located in the area prompted the Buick Motor Division of General Motors to locate here. In the late 1990's Melrose Park's water transmission system was rebuilt and serves as a water distribution center for surrounding towns.

The Elmer Galnex farm, the site at the corner of Mannheim Road and North Avenue became the Nor-Man Airport in 1930. Ten years later, the land was annexed to the Village and chosen as the site for the Aviation Engine Plant, building Pratt-Whitney engines for the military. It was the largest national defense plant project to come to the Chicago area. The plant employed more than 10,000 people, and thousands of students at Proviso High School were provided special training in the type of work being done there. Following the end of World War II, the operation was taken over by the International Harvester Company. Today corporate giant Navistar stands on that spot.



**Assembly Workers at International Harvester in the 1940's**

Another far-sighted plan-of Village officials in 1941 was the purchase of land at Twenty-fifth and Armitage Avenues as a dumping ground for garbage which would save the Village thousands of dollars each year. The ground fill eventually became a valuable piece of industrial property.

As World War II ended, industry found Melrose Park to be a community of excellent resources, including an able labor force, great transportation facilities, a good water and sewage system, fire and security protection, and a forward-looking local government that encouraged companies to locate in Melrose Park.

Moving from Chicago were the Henry Valve Company in 1948 and the renowned Benjamin Moore Paint Company on Thanksgiving in 1950. In February 1956, the Clauss Fuel Company silo, built in 1929 at 1800 N. Twenty-fifth Avenue, was destroyed to make room for a five-and-one-half acre industrial development. The Kimball Piano Company opened a new plant in 1956, and in 1958 Reflector Hardware, Graybar Electric, Flick Reedy and Home Juice joined the list of Melrose Park industries. The AlbertoCulver Company located their headquarters in Melrose Park with their cosmetics, food, and coating factories.



**Jewel is one of the many corporations that have called Melrose Park their home.**

Many businesses followed, both large and small. But the decision made in 1956 by Jewel Companies Inc. to locate their headquarters here truly made Melrose Park the "Industrial King of the Suburbs." Jewel at that time was one of the top 15 food corporations in the U.S.

Some of these corporations have moved on, like Benjamin Moore, but Melrose Park is still a recognized leader in being home to many industrial and manufacturing concerns that employ several thousand people, many of whom are Melrose Park residents.