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## Skokie's Historic Bike Tour

When Skokie - originally Niles Centre - was incorporated in 1888, it looked radically different than the thriving suburb of Chicago that it is today. The one mile square area was heavily wooded, teamed with wild animals and was covered with swampland. Prior to 1834, Potawatomi Native Americans lived in the area, having blazed trails that are now Lincoln Avenue and Niles Center Road. As European pioneers began settling in the area, farms and greenhouses became abundant. After World War II, Skokie experienced tremendous population growth and became a bustling urban community.

1. **Emily Oaks Nature Center - 4650 Brummel St.**

The Niles Center Park District formed in 1928. Among the first land purchased for park district use was the area that would encompass Oakton Park and Emily Oaks Nature Center, which opened in 1988. At the same time, land for Terminal Park was also purchased.

2. **Oakton Park - 4701 Oakton St.**

In its early days, most of Oakton Park was covered with water. Because Skokie's population increased nearly 300 percent in the 1950s, residents passed a referendum authorizing the Skokie Park District to purchase and develop 17 new parks, including a community center and pool at Devonshire Park. By 1961, the Oakton Community Center and Pool opened, replacing a field house and a remaining small pond.

3. **Oakton Community College, formerly Niles Township High School - 7701 Lincoln Ave.**

Niles Township High School was located here, built in 1939 as part of a Works Progress Administration project. The only remnant from the school still standing is the flag pole, which originally came from the Century of Progress World's Fair held in Chicago in 1933-34.

4. **Schoening's Blacksmith Shop - 7880 Lincoln Ave.**

Common businesses in early Niles Centre included taverns and blacksmith shops. This building was Fred Schoening's second blacksmith shop; the first was at 7902 Lincoln Ave. (at the corner of Lincoln and Galitz). Schoening worked on many residents' wagons and buggies, including that of prominent physician A. Louise Klehm. Although the façade is quite different, the original building still stands, with a remnant of the structure's original purpose — a horse shoe — imbedded in the sidewalk.

5. **St. Paul's Lutheran Church - 5201 Galitz St.**

St. Paul's Lutheran Church and school were founded by a group of dissident congregants from St. Peter's Evangelical Church in 1880. On a one half acre plot of land donated by Henry Rohr, the first church, a wooden structure, was built in 1881. The present brick church replaced the wooden church in 1910. Inside, one can see vivid stained glass windows with German inscriptions bearing the names of some of Niles Centre's pioneer families. Services were conducted in German at this church until the 1950s. The church features an oak altar framing a life-sized figure of Christ and a pipe organ with 1569 pipes, dedicated in 1975.

6. **Harrer House - 5309 Oakton St.**

Built of brick in 1908 by Adam Harrer (the first mayor of Niles Centre, as well as the first fire chief) this house contained two fireplaces, two parlors, four bedrooms and four bathrooms. The garden apartment below was once used as a shop. Over the years, the home was refurbished several times. It is currently restored to an appearance similar to its original construction.

7. **Skokie Public Library - 5215 Oakton St.**

The library formed in 1930 as a project of the Cosmos Club, later the Civic Women's Club of Skokie. Because of a lack of funds, the library closed in 1932 and reopened in 1933. Before relocating to its current building in 1960, the library was first located at 5102 Oakton St., and then at 4913 Oakton St. Designed by James Hammond and Walter Netsch, of Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, the building is a fine example of modern architecture. The interior also reflected this modernity through its furnishings; famed architect Mies Van der Rohe provided its chairs. The second floor addition, also designed by James Hammond, was constructed in 1972, with the third floor added in 2003. The second floor is 292 feet long; eight feet shy of the length of a football field.

8. **St. Peter's United Church of Christ - 8013 Laramie Ave.**

The church stands on land donated by Peter and Magdalena Heinz Blameuser. Mr. Blameuser, a Roman Catholic, stipulated that the church be named for his patron saint, St. Peter. The deed also stated that no part of the land could be used for a cemetery, so the congregation's cemetery is located on the west side of Harms Rd., north of Lincoln Ave. The original building was constructed in 1868 and a bell tower was added in 1887. The bell tower was struck by lightning in 1901, damaging the structure to the point that the church needed to be rebuilt. The current structure was built in 1903. In 1957, the church was renamed St. Peter's United Church of Christ, when The Evangelical and Reformed Church merged with the Congregational Christian Church.

9. **Skokie Village Hall - 5127 Oakton St.**

Designed to reflect Independence Hall in Philadelphia, the Niles Center Village Hall was built in 1927 during a land boom. Elements of the façade include color tile accents, a gold cupola, four massive wooden columns, plasters, and window arches. The building was remodeled in the 1950s and the southern section and garden entry were added in the 1980s. Until the police station opened in 1957, the village police department and jail were located in the hall; the east side windows were barred, suggesting that the east wing housed jail cells.

10. **Floral Avenue**

Originally named Back Street, Floral Avenue was one of Niles Centre's first residential streets. Many large, older homes can still be seen on Floral Avenue. One home no longer present was located at the northwest corner of Floral and Oakton. The home belonged to Edwin T. Klehm, and was the first home to feature windmill powered indoor plumbing, and electricity. Further north on Floral Avenue are several older homes including the house at 8024, across from the Skokie Heritage Museum. Built in 1877, the house belonged to Charles Kindt, one of Niles Centre's first mailmen. Its original shingles and ironwork have been covered and removed, and a larger porch has been added. However, some older elements are still visible, such as the stone base of the house.

**11. Skokie Heritage Museum and Log Cabin - 8031 Floral Ave.**

The Engine House was built in 1887 — a keystone commemorating this event can still be seen on the front of the building. The engine house also served over the years as the Village Hall, a jail, a school, and community meeting room and dance hall. The Skokie Fire Department used the Engine House until 1969, and in the 1970s, the Health Department used it, until an addition to the Village Hall opened. When the Health Department relocated to Village Hall, it became the home of the Skokie Historical Society. In 1991, the Skokie Park District renovated the Engine House. The Log Cabin located behind the Historic Engine House was built in 1847 by Nicholas and Elizabeth Meyer, who lived there with eight of their twelve children. Mr. Meyer farmed his 60 acres and made wagon wheels. The cabin originally stood at 5406 Lincoln Ave., and after being deeded to the Village of Skokie in 1974, moved to its current location in 1982. (See historical markers for further information on both structures).

**12. Southwest corner of Floral and Cleveland**

The end of this block was home to the Stielow and Lies greenhouses. Greenhouses were an important part of life in early Niles Centre. The area became known for its vegetable and flower production, holding its own Market Days, as well as supplying items to Chicago. Over time the greenhouses were eliminated because of pollution caused by smoke from their chimneys, as well as suburban development. Stielow and Kusky began the first greenhouse in Niles Centre. Still present is the Stielow family's brick home at 8114 Floral Ave. Just north of the home were the Niles center Recreation Rooms and Niles Center Home Laundry, both built in the 1920s and recently razed.

**13. St. Paul Cemetery - 8551 Harms Rd.**

The names of many of Niles Centre's pioneer families can be found in this cemetery including: Galitz, Hacker, Harms and Harrer. In 1934, the body of gangster "Baby Face" Nelson, a.k.a. Lester Gillis, was found at St. Paul Cemetery. After a shootout at a bank in Barrington, his gang including his girlfriend, dumped his body at the cemetery. Local funeral home operator Ray Haben received an anonymous call disclosing Nelson's location. The body was then kept at Haben Funeral Home while the FBI investigated the incident.

**14. Lockwood Park - 5230 Carol St.**

This park was part of the Dahm family's homestead, on which they grew acres of blueberries and buttercups. The Dahm family also owned and operated farmland and greenhouses near Dempster Street and Gross Point Road. By 1924, the land, then owned by Peter Dahm and his wife Wilhelmina Fortmann Dahm, and situated between Dempster Street, Gross Point Road and the Chicago Northwestern Railway, had been subdivided for real estate development.

**15. "L" Station - 5001 Dempster St.**

In 1924, an electric railroad line was constructed from Howard Street in Chicago to Dempster Street. A station opened on Dempster Street in 1926. The prairie style station continued to be used until an updated Skokie Swift station was built here in 1993. In danger of being demolished, the old station was saved and moved east of its original location by the Skokie Historical Society and other concerned citizens. In 1996, the building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places and is presently occupied by a Starbucks.

**16. Stielow Residence - 8534 Terminal Ave.**

This large, red brick house originally belonged to the Stielow family. Additions have since been made to the structure. Frederick Stielow owned greenhouses on Floral Avenue (see #12 above) as well and started the first greenhouse in Niles Centre with Kusky. After Kusky accidentally shot himself, Stielow partnered first with Kusky's widow and then Albert Lies. Later, without a partner, Stielow ran one of the largest greenhouse operations in the area. The family's success is evident from the structure here. Some of their greenhouses were located northwest of the house.

**17. St. Peter Catholic Church and School - 8116 Niles Center Rd.**

In 1867, Peter and Magdalena Heinz Blameuser donated land for the construction of St. Peter Catholic Church. Its first mass was held in 1869. The church's original wooden structure, built at a cost of \$3,536, was replaced by the current brick structure in 1894. Designed by Chicago architect Henry Schlacks in Gothic Revival style, it incorporated eight trees into its support system for the vaulted ceiling. St. Peter Catholic School was built in 1873 at the fork where Lincoln Avenue and Niles Center Road meet, but later moved north to make way for the current church building.

**18. St. Peter Catholic Cemetery — just east of St. Peter Church**

Chartered in 1869, the cemetery is filled with many of Niles Centre's early settlers. The cemetery land was donated by Peter Blameuser and his brother Eberhard. Some of the graves of Niles Centre pioneers that can be seen from the street are: Paroubek, Blameuser, Muno, and Gabel. Many tombstone inscriptions are written in German since many of the Village's early settlers immigrated from Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, and other middle European countries.

**19. Harrer's Butcher Shop - 8051 Lincoln Ave.**

In 1874, Michael Harrer, uncle of Niles Centre's first mayor, Adam Harrer, started his butcher shop here. He came to the area from Bavaria in 1845 after first trying his hand at farming and mining out west. The building, now owned by the Haben family (who run the local funeral home), contained living spaces upstairs and the store below. In the 1980s, the building was renovated and turned into a single-family home. It is also one of only two buildings in Skokie on the National Registry of Historic Places. The age of this building can be seen in the keystone at the top of the building.

**20. Schoeneberger's General Store - 8042 Lincoln Ave.**

The stone and brick building was built around 1910 and replaced the Schoenebergers' earlier store, which was made of wood. The 8044 Lincoln Ave. section of the building was added on later. Paroubek's Bakery, which opened ca. 1915 later moved to 8044 Lincoln Avenue and was renamed Paroubek's Community Bakery. Even though Paroubek's Community Bakery has since closed, the space has remained in use as a bakery - first as Vitello's Bakery and currently as Sweety Pie's Bakery.

**21. Lincoln Avenue and Oakton Street - at Krier Plaza**

Henry (Heinrich) Harms, one of Skokie's founding fathers, opened the first store in the area at the southeast corner of Oakton and Lincoln in 1858. In addition to the store, Harms also built a tavern and the Niles Centre Hotel, which was later operated by future village trustee Fritz Rose. A picnic grove filled with trees existed behind the hotel. The hotel burned down in 1911. Krier plaza is named for civic leader Martin "Scotty" Krier, Democratic Committeeman of Niles Township, President of Section 15 of the Luxembourg Brotherhood of America, the patron of the Skokie Indians baseball team, and owner of Krier's Restaurant.