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THE GOOD LIFE
IN SHAKER HEIGHTS

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BY DONALD M. KENNEDY



VISIONARY VAN SWERINGEN brothers built this baronial mansion. Born penniless, the two Cleveland brothers made a road fortune from paper route and butter-and-egg business.

The Good Life in Shaker Heights

The wealthiest city in the United States boasts practically no unemployment, no slums. Back-yard swimming pools are commonplace, nearly everyone belongs to a country club and most kids have new cars. Here is the inside story of an American dream town come true.

BY THOMAS MEEHAN

In many ways, Shaker Heights, Ohio, a gold-plated suburban residential city some six miles east of downtown Cleveland, resembles a number of other such upper-class suburban American communities, like Grosse Pointe, Michigan, or Wilmette, Illinois, or Greenwich, Connecticut. Yet Shaker Heights is unique in one highly significant way—it is, according to the latest United States Bureau of Census figures, the wealthiest city in America. That is, people in Shaker Heights annually earn more money than people in any other American city, with a median family annual income of \$13,933, the highest in the country.

The visitor's first impression of America's wealthiest city is of quiet streets lined with elms and Norway maples, of immaculately landscaped lawns and of an astonishing number of expensive, nonmodern homes built on relatively small—half-acre and one-acre—plots of ground. On street after street, one sees

close-packed rows of fifteen- and twenty-room houses, mainly colonial or Tudor in style, each of which is unquestionably worth sixty to eighty thousand dollars; yet, unlike what one is apt to encounter in such enclaves of wealth as Oyster Bay or Tuxedo Park, one finds in Shaker Heights few million-dollar mansions and no large estates with cottages for the servants, outsized kennels and stables.

No Polo Ponies; Just Money

With a population of 36,460, the entire city covers only six and a half square miles, so that, in fact, there's literally no room in Shaker Heights for the multimillionaire with his string of polo ponies, hunting preserve and private landing strip. "We have a smattering of millionaires in Shaker Heights," said one old-time resident recently, "but most of the well-to-do people here live on their incomes, which for a good number range from fifty thousand a year on up to a

hundred thousand or more. Of course, there are lots of sons and daughters of millionaires living here—this is mainly a second-generation-rich community."

Shaker Heights money comes principally from corporation salaries. The Cleveland area is heavily industrialized, with Republic Steel, Westinghouse, General Electric and Chevrolet, to mention just a few of the major companies with plants in the vicinity, employing thousands of workers. The area is also filled with hundreds of smaller industrial concerns, with names like Motch & Merry weather Machinery and The Commercial Forgings Company, and a good percentage of the top executives in these corporations live in Shaker Heights. Thomas F. Patton, for instance, who's chairman of the board of Republic Steel, lives in Shaker Heights, and so does Samuel Littlejohn, a retired vice-president of General Electric. In addition to corporation executives, many of Cleveland

most successful doctors, lawyers and bankers also live in Shaker Heights. There are, however, almost no nationally known figures who live there, with the exception of George Szell, the conductor of the Cleveland Orchestra, and Paul Brown, vice-president of the Cleveland Browns.

Of course, not everyone in Shaker Heights lives in an eighty-thousand-dollar house and pulls down sixty thousand a year. There are more modest areas of town where the houses are worth perhaps only twenty-five thousand dollars and where people struggle along on a mere ten to twenty thousand a year. There is, though, nothing approaching poverty in Shaker Heights—while the median family annual income is the Census Bureau's \$13,933, the average family annual income is actually close to \$24,000, i.e., there are 10,402 families living in Shaker Heights and they have a combined annual income of \$249,000,000.

From a thumbnail observation, the typical male Shaker Heights resident owns and lives in one of the city's 6,787 single-family houses, along with his wife, a pedigreed dog or two and, somewhat surprisingly, four or five children. If he's lucky, he and his family live north of Van Aken Boulevard between Lee Road and Warrensville Road, which is the wealthiest part of town, and if he's especially lucky (and rich), he lives on either South Park Boulevard or North Park Boulevard, which are the city's two poshest streets, though no one need be ashamed of living on South Woodland Road or Shaker Boulevard. However, no matter where he lives, he's apt to be middle-aged or older, for Shaker Heights is not a young man's city.

Scarcely Tobacco Road

The homes in Shaker Heights have a median value of \$34,500, although, as with income, the average value is perhaps nearly twice that, or around \$65,000. In any event, an estimated 66 per cent of the homes in Shaker Heights have from seven to ten rooms, not including bathrooms; 56 per cent have five bedrooms or more. Of course, even in Shaker Heights not everyone owns his own home. According to the Census Bureau, Shaker Heights has 4,281 so-called renter-occupied units, which includes the apartments in 115 apartment buildings and the halves of the city's 1,200 two-family houses. The median monthly rent for the Shaker Heights tenants is \$168, which is the highest for any city in the United States. Along Van Aken Boulevard, which is one of Shaker Heights' main thoroughfares, one sees rows of red-brick apartment houses of the sort one might see in the better sections of Queens. Van Aken is scarcely Tobacco Road, though, and the inquirer soon finds out that behind the plain, red-

brick façades are some rather elegant apartments—eight- and ten-room layouts that rent for an average of four hundred dollars a month. Blair House, a handsome new apartment house at the east end of Van Aken, has quarters that rent for as high as one thousand dollars a month, and other buildings along the Boulevard are co-operative, with apartments selling for thirty and forty thousand dollars apiece. In fact, some of Shaker Heights' wealthier elder citizens, whose children are grown and who've become tired of maintaining twenty-room houses, now live in these co-operatives.

Other than the apartment buildings on Van Aken and two modern shopping centers, there's been relatively little building in Shaker Heights in the last few years, and, while one spots an occasional modern home, most of the houses were built in the twenties and the thirties. Actually, there are almost no building lots left in Shaker Heights, and for this reason local officials estimate that, in terms of population, the city is now about as big as it's ever going to be. Because the houses are not new in Shaker Heights, the interiors tend to be traditional rather than modern and, as for décor, there's a heavy leaning toward comfortable contemporary furniture or antique early American. The Shaker Heights family, however, does not deprive itself of the more modern conveniences: according to a test survey of one hundred persons, 99 per cent of the families in

Shaker Heights have washing machines; 98 per cent have one or more television sets (4 per cent have color TV); 96 per cent have one or more radios; 84 per cent have dishwashers; 68 per cent have hi-fi or stereo sets; 81 per cent have garbage disposal units; 58 per cent have freezers; and 97 per cent have one or more cars. In Shaker Heights, the automobile remains an important status symbol, with almost all of the wealthier families having at least three cars. Typically, the Shaker Heights family has one high-priced American car, a station wagon and a foreign sports car (most likely a Jaguar, a Porsche or a Ferrari.)

Town Had to Adjust to Teens

In addition, just about every boy and girl in Shaker Heights who's old enough to sit behind the wheel has his or her own car and, in place of the jalopies that high school kids batted around in a few years ago, these kids almost all have brand new cars, often convertibles. In any case, 97 per cent of the cars in Shaker Heights are bought new, and at Shaker Heights High School there is an enormous special parking area for student cars which, on a good day, looks like an outdoor version of the 1963 Automobile Show, while the nearby faculty parking area looks like a truck-route used-car lot. With 1,800 students attending the school, the morning and afternoon traffic jams around Shaker Heights High became so bad that

Photo by Mammol Corlan



SHAKER HEIGHTS WOMEN Mrs. Max Lewis, Mrs. Marian Levy and...
looking latter's indoor pool. Modern inside, home has a conservative façade.

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all the streets in the area were recently made one-way.

All in all, with an almost total absence of slums, poverty, unemployment or, in fact, any of the problems which plague just about every other American city, Shaker Heights is a kind of three-cars-in-every-garage Utopia. In Shaker Heights, the American dream has come true in spades and, while it isn't Erewhon, it's probably the closest thing to a Utopian city that, in the age of Project Apollo, one is likely to find in the United States.

From Shaker Roots . . .

It's especially curious that the term Utopia may be used in connection with Shaker Heights, for the city stands on the site of an unsuccessful nineteenth century Utopia. In the summer of 1822, when the land which is now Shaker Heights was a wilderness, a man named Ralph Russell founded a communistic share-the-wealth religious settlement there. Russell was at the time a recent convert to a sect called the Shakers, an offshoot of the Quakers, who believed in common property and communal living and who got their name from the frenzied, shaking dancing that accompanied their praying. Converting his four broth-

ers and their families to Shakerism, Russell led thirty-two settlers—nine adults and twenty-three children—to the colony he named North Union. Later, more converts to Shakerism came to North Union, and within a few years close to three hundred people were living there. They cleared the land, planted wheat and corn, built dams and grist mills and schools and, following their tenets, lived communally, with a central meeting house and separate dormitories for the men and the women. However, in the separate dormitories for men and women lay the seeds of failure for North Union, for all those who converted to Shakerism swore themselves to lifelong celibacy, an oath that was scarcely conducive to creating an enduring community. When grown, a number of the original children, feeling normal adult sexual urges, deserted the community, as did Ralph Russell himself who, after a few years in North Union, renounced Shakerism and moved away with his family. Nevertheless, with the addition of converts and orphaned children, whom the Shakers took in and raised as their own, North Union lasted for almost seventy years. By 1889, though, there were only twenty-seven aged Shakers left

in North Union and, admitting that their attempt to create a lasting communistic Utopia had failed, the twenty-seven abandoned the community and joined other Shaker colonies. The Shakers sold the North Union land, some 1,366 acres, to a Buffalo land development syndicate for \$316,000, and that was the end of Shakerism in the area. Today, there are no Shaker buildings left standing in Shaker Heights—the only evidences of the nineteenth century Utopian experiment are three small and rather attractive lakes that were created by dams the Shakers had built for their grist mills, a couple of Shaker gates, two tiny Shaker cemeteries and another burial ground which is all but in the middle of a private residence. In modern Shaker Heights, the only shakers to be found are cocktail shakers, the only frenzied dancing to be seen is the Twist, and the communism of old has been replaced by what can only be described as galloping capitalism.

The Buffalo syndicate soon sold the North Union land for over a million dollars, thus making a fast 300 per cent profit on their money. The purchasers were a pair of young Cleveland real estate speculators, two shy bachelor brothers named Oris Paxton Van Sweringen and Mantis James Van Sweringen. O. P. and M. J., as they were known to everyone, had started life penniless, with a newspaper route and a one-horse butter-and-egg wagon on the outskirts of Cleveland. With only eighth-grade educations, they had, by 1906 (when O. P. was twenty-seven and M. J. was twenty-five), made a small fortune for themselves in Cleveland real estate. When they bought the Shaker land, using most of their fortune to do it, the acreage was little more than brambly, treeless countryside which was broken only by streams, the Shaker lakes and the many ruins of long-deserted Shaker dams and mills and communal buildings.

The Right to Veto

It was the Van Sweringens' idea to turn this barren countryside into a rich man's community with broad central avenues, curving residential streets, parks, trees, expensive homes. They relandscaped the area, laid out a network of streets and, on October 27, 1911, incorporated the six-and-a-half-square-mile tract as Shaker Village, Ohio (which in 1931 became the incorporated city of Shaker Heights). They began selling lots in the new community at \$25 a running foot, with the stipulation that the buyer must build on the land a house costing at least \$17,500, a figure probably equal today to about \$70,000. They also retained the right to examine and possibly to veto the architect's plans for all houses to be built in Shaker Village and to per-



CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART, under Dr. Sherman E. Lee, draws much patronage from Shaker Heights, was second bidder for \$2,300,000 Rembrandt.

sonally screen all prospective residents.

Because it was difficult to get to Shaker Village from Cleveland, very few people, rich or otherwise, bought land at first. For this reason, in 1912, the Van Sweringens decided to build a trolley line out to Shaker Village from downtown Cleveland. However, when they tried to buy the right of way, they found that they were unable to get their hands on a necessary two-mile stretch owned by the Nickel Plate Railroad. Then, daringly, they borrowed a bundle from banks and, in 1916, bought the Nickel Plate Railroad itself, thus at the same time getting the right of way for the trolley and finding themselves in the railroad business, which opened up a totally new area of speculation for them. In the next several years, O. P. and M. J. Van Sweringen bought and sold some eighty railroads, and as the year 1929 loomed on the horizon they controlled railroads and real estate worth some two billion dollars and had for themselves a personal fortune estimated at \$120,000,000.

Go Directly to Poverty

By that time, they were playing Monopoly with their own dice, as it were, with hotels all the way around the board from Mediterranean to the Boardwalk, but the stock-market crash left them with little more than their original butter-and-egg wagon and they went into bankruptcy. An indomitable pair in business dealings, they began a financial recovery, but, before they had made much headway, death ended their careers—M. J. died on December 12, 1935, at the age of fifty-four, and less than a year later, on November 23, 1936, O. P. died at the age of fifty-seven.

Once the Van Sweringen brothers were gone from the scene, the restrictions they had invoked in Shaker Heights were gradually dropped, and today there are a substantial number of Catholics and Jews living in the city, as well as a number of Negroes who have recently moved into the Ludlow area of Shaker Heights, south of Van Aken Boulevard. The Shaker Heights Negroes are mainly professional people, doctors and lawyers, along with some Negro businessmen, and there have been no racial incidents at the schools or problems of prejudice against the Negro children. In short, in the manner of a good Utopia, America's wealthiest city is unobtrusively integrated. Despite their narrow religious and racial prejudices, one senses that if the Van Sweringen brothers were alive today they would be pleased with what they see in Shaker Heights, for their dream of a half century ago has come true almost exactly as they had planned it. The broad boulevards and curving residential streets, the trees, the parks,



THEATER-MINDED Shaker Heights citizens help sustain *The Cleveland Play House* directed by K. Elmo Lowe. Theater also houses this unique supper club.

the expensive homes—all are there. And certainly, as businessmen, they'd be proud of the financial success their real estate development has become—in 1911, when O. P. and M. J. incorporated Shaker Village, the tax assessed value of the community was only \$2,525,800, while today it's \$174,646,261.

The Van Sweringens' trolley line was completed in 1920 and it started a Shaker Heights boom that, in a way, is still going on. In 1920, when the trolley, or the Shaker Heights Rapid Transit, as it's officially known, went into operation, the population of the village was only 1,616, while by 1930 it was 17,783 (for the record, the 1940 population was 23,393 and the 1950 figure was 28,222). The Rapid, as everyone in Shaker Heights

calls the trolley, is still running, and for thirty cents (or seven rides for \$1.90) one can whiz from Shaker Heights to the heart of downtown Cleveland in about twenty minutes. "The Rapid made the Van Sweringens' Shaker Heights real estate experiment a success," the city's mayor, Paul Jones, told a visitor not long ago, "and it's helped to keep the city an especially desirable place to live." The Rapid, which is owned and operated at a profit by the city of Shaker Heights, comes out from Cleveland on one track and then runs the length of Shaker Heights on two spurs, one running in the center of Van Aken Boulevard and the other running in the center of Shaker Boulevard, another of the city's main streets (and one of its classiest; for this

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reason, it's considered somewhat more chic in Shaker Heights to ride the Rapid's Shaker Boulevard spur), so that, with the entire city covering such a small area and being a good deal longer than it is wide, there's practically no home in Shaker Heights which isn't within easy walking distance of the Rapid. In consequence, nearly all the citizens of Shaker Heights, including one-hundred-thousand-dollar-a-year executives, commute to Cleveland on the trolley. Any weekday morning at about eight thirty, one can see the top-level executives with their attaché cases climbing on the Rapid and heading downtown as their kids zoom by in Oldsmobile convertibles. "We've got three cars," said one such commuter the other day. "One for my wife, two for the kids, and I ride the Rapid."

Actually, the man who made that statement could afford a Rolls-Royce and a chauffeur to drive him downtown, but that sort of thing would be frowned on in Shaker Heights. It's acceptable to have other types of servants, cooks or maids or butlers or gardeners, and, in fact, 43 per cent. of the households surveyed in Shaker Heights have one or more full-time servants, but to have a chauffeur is to go one step too far—such ostentation is not for the reserved people of Shaker Heights.

Returning from a visit to Shaker Heights, the traveler is perhaps most often asked this question: But what's life really like in Shaker Heights—how do the people in America's wealthiest city really live? Well, it's essentially a pretty quiet city, peopled mainly by conservative Middle Westerners. Politically, one informed local observer estimates that the residents who fifteen years ago were just about 100 per cent Republican, are now about 50 per cent Republican, 25 per cent Democrat and 25 per cent independent. As for night life in Shaker Heights, there's almost none. "People in Shaker Heights don't go in much for night life—we entertain at home," one resident said recently, backing up the results of a survey that showed that the majority of families in Shaker Heights entertain in their homes.

How Not to Be "Nowheresville"

There's one place outside the home, however, that is of crucial social importance to anyone who lives in Shaker Heights—the country club. "The entire social structure of this city is built around country clubs," the manager of one of the nearby clubs said not long ago, "and no matter what those who aren't members may say, you're strictly nowheresville in Shaker Heights if you aren't a member of a good country club." With an estimated thirty country clubs in the envi-

club-happy area, but this mania is at its zenith in Shaker Heights.

If it's important in Shaker Heights to belong to the right country club, it's almost equally important to belong to the right downtown Cleveland club. There are a dozen or so highly respected downtown clubs, including the Cleveland Athletic Club, the University Club, the Mid-day Club, the Tavern Club and the Hermit Club, but there's only one downtown club that really counts socially—the Union Club. If one is not a member of the Union Club, one has not yet made the inner circle of Cleveland and Shaker Heights society. Among other things, the Union Club is the scene of the annual Assembly Ball, a Christmas coming-out dance that is sponsored by a Cleveland women's organization called the Recreation League. Some forty debutantes come out at the Assembly Ball each year and, not surprisingly, a good number of them are from Shaker Heights. Anyway, if a girl is socially anybody in Shaker Heights, she must be introduced to society at the Assembly Ball.

Jr. High—or Jr. Country Club?

"I guess the thing most of us here in Shaker Heights are proudest of is our public school system, which is ranked as one of the four or five best in the country," Mayor Jones says. And the schools in Shaker Heights are indeed impressive. There's a high school, two junior high schools, two special schools and nine elementary schools, all of them dazzlingly well-equipped, modern buildings. Some 7,650 students—with an astonishingly high average IQ of 118—attend the Shaker Heights schools and are taught by 392 teachers for an average of about twenty students to every teacher. Academically, the schools are ranked close to the top nationally, with 90 per cent of the graduates of Shaker Heights High School going on to college, usually to Eastern colleges—Ivy League schools for the boys and Vassar, Smith, Wellesley, etc., for the girls. The showplace of the Shaker Heights school system is the Byron Junior High School, a \$4,500,000 project, one of the few examples of extreme modern architecture in the city. With 815 students, Byron has an auditorium that seats almost a thousand and looks a little like a scaled-down version of Lincoln Center's Philharmonic Hall; a boys' gymnasium and a girls' gymnasium, each a good deal larger than most high school gymnasiums; an Olympic-sized indoor swimming pool; and, among other special conveniences, a row of beauty-parlor hair dryers in the girls' locker room. The Shaker Heights schools have no problem with overcrowding, dropouts, teachers' salaries or any of the other trou-

blems in America's non-Utopian cities.

In addition to the excellent public schools, there are three exclusive private schools in Shaker Heights—Hathaway Brown and Laurel, which are girls' boarding schools, and the University School, which is a boys' prep school. In effect, all three are country day schools, drawing most of their students from among the sons and daughters of the more well-heeled Shaker Heighters, or Shakers, as they usually refer to themselves.

As one might also expect in Utopia, Shaker Heights has a highly efficient fire department and police force, while its service department, which takes care of the city's roads, its 27,000 trees, its public landscaping, etc., is considered one of the best in the country. Since there's very little crime in Shaker Heights, the police department mainly concerns itself with traffic violations and similar misdemeanors, although there's a good deal of non-Utopian juvenile delinquency which the department is called upon to handle, mostly boys' pranks. Not many of the cases end up on the records, so juvenile delinquency statistics for the city are exceptionally low.

There's practically no cultural life in Shaker Heights itself, unless a movie theater counts as culture. People from Shaker Heights attend the concerts of the Cleveland Orchestra, go to performances at the Cleveland Play House, catch the occasional Broadway road show that turns up in Cleveland and drop around once in a while to the Cleveland Museum of Art, but that's about it. Certainly, no one could argue that Shaker Heights itself is a cultural center—when pressed, the residents can think of no local painters and only one local writer, a poetess named Mae Winkler Goodman, whose *Verge of Eden*, a slim volume of verses, was published a few months ago.

Entertainment Is Usually Liquid

What to do in Shaker Heights? Well, there's the country club for parties and dances and for sitting around at the bar to drink Stingers until two in the morning, talking of golf scores and bridge games and the stock market. Then there are the parties in private homes, many given in cellar recreation rooms which, in Shaker Heights, often turn out to be practically the size of the Copacabana, with enormous bars and enough dancing room for a hundred couples. The cellar recreation room is also the scene of most of the teen-age Coke and record parties, although some of the more daring teenagers occasionally sneak off to a roadhouse for a few glasses of beer. No one in Shaker Heights can think of any local residents who are members of international society or the jet set.