

## **A Brief History of Old Willowbank**

Following the close of WWII there were some families in Davis who felt a need for a living situation that didn't quite fall into any of the existing categories, they wanted a home that was neither city nor truly rural. In the early 1940's, Paul G. Smith came to Davis to work in the Agriculture Department of UCD. He had come from the rural Mid-West. With the end of WWII, housing was tight in Davis, he rented a house outside of Davis on Montgomery Avenue.

A farm property came up for sale, 22 acres south of the Putah Creek Branch Channel and 22 acres north of the Branch Channel. He chose this acreage because of the loamy soil along the Creek bed where you could grow anything. He approached several colleagues at the university to see if there was an interest of buying lots for homes. All together 10 families were interested in creating a new community. He later sold the 22 acres to the north of Putah Creek.

The land for Willowbank was originally part of the Montgomery family ranch. In early years this south area was known as "Skunk Island". The land was higher than other areas and when the land flooded, the skunks would go to higher ground. This area was subject to flooding from Putah Creek, which originally snaked from the east, along the now Arboretum, across Olive Drive, under the now Highway 80, running behind the newer development, Oakshade, and curving southward at the old Road 103 (south of Montgomery Ave). The old channel of Putah Creek created the boundary between Yolo County and Solano County. In 1861 the entire area experienced a great flood and Putah Creek cut a new channel, south of the airport and south of this area, which we see today. In 1948 the Army Core of Engineers "sealed off" the old branch of Putah Creek south of the UCD Airport, ending the possibility of future flooding in the Willowbank area.

In 1946 the Paul G. Smith Subdivision was established, and the property was divided into two acre lots and sold to the 10 UCD individuals; a dirt road was cut through the barley field from Montgomery Avenue north to the creek. The property owners signed the "Declaration Imposing Covenants and Restrictions Affecting the Paul G Smith Subdivision" in 1946. The document included setbacks, rules of land use, restrictions on animals (no pigs), prohibiting commercial businesses, maintaining the lot sizes (no smaller than .5 acres), the minimum size of a home (1,000 sf).

The first homes were built in 1948 and 1949. The area was rural, they had no garbage pick-up, no milk or paper delivery, and no school buses or public transportation. Car pooling became a way of life. Many of the families built their own homes on weekends, hiring out the electrical and plumbing. In 1953, the Jamesons made their own bricks to build their home. Many had to subdivide their property to pay for their home construction.

The pioneering landowners established a legal nonprofit corporation for the purpose of developing a water supply, set up gas from PG&E, set up sewage system, telephone service

and other issues to the community as well as serving as a social club. In 1947 they started a club called The Smith Tract Association, later changed to The Willowbank Club. The club is still in operation today. In 1948, they agreed to plant Chinese Hackberry trees along the road (then called Cottonwood Lane – by the County) as well as Almond Lane and Walnut Lane. When the land was first developed, there was one Oak tree in the development – on Montgomery. The tree is still there today. (Note, Willowbank Road was known for its tree canopied street; unfortunately, due to the trees' limited life spans along with the recent drought, most of the hackberry trees have died. The Willowbank Club has replanted the road with Chinese Pistache and Oak trees. It will be decades before the road restores the majestic look it once had.

In 1957 a permanent water committee was formed to operate and maintain the water system. Water rates increased from \$1.00 a month to \$3.00 a month.

One of the original landowners, Hilda Keefer, suggested the street be named Willowbank because of the Willow trees that were along the Creek. (Although many of the men referred to the road as “backachers” due to all the back breaking work they did themselves, specifically, the digging of trenches for the water lines to save themselves money.) In 1959, the County agreed to officially change the name of the street to Willowbank Road.

Around 1957 Don Miller was developing the Meadowbrook subdivision which included the remaining parts of Almond Lane and Walnut Lane along with the portions of Montgomery east one lot to Willowbank.

The Jamesons were also developing the Oakside subdivision. It consisted of three phases, first the main street, then East Oakside in 1961 and West Oakside in 1963 as well as the Montgomery lots west of Willowbank Road and a portion of Montgomery to the west to the bridge. Marcia Kreith and her husband purchased a lot on East Oakside. She recalls the close community on Oakside, neighbors would look after neighbors, the men would gather for happy hour, there were frequent potlucks, and there were Fourth of July parades.

Each subdivision had their own water well, separate corporations and by-laws.

In 1966, common interest indicated a need for an organization representing all three subdivisions and other families living in the adjacent county area (not part of the City). The Greater Willowbank Improvement Association (GWIA) was formed and continues today. Each area has representation on the Board of Directors (two from each street). Elections are held annually and the term of office is 3 years.

In 1969 annexation to the City of Davis came up, but there was no interest. “Old Willowbank” continued to be.

In 1989 the Oakside well (located on the northwest corner of 43146 Oakside) was failing due to contamination problems. In 1990 the Willowbank well site (located at 43250 Montgomery, Southwest corner) was suffering from either contamination and/or leaking pipes, depending on the source of information. The Meadowbrook well although still in compliance, thanks to Eric Conn (the well was on his property at 27240 Meadowbrook) and neighbor Jim Hilliard; however, this well, along with the other two neighboring wells had gone beyond their useful lives and in the event of a fire, there was a huge concern in the neighborhood that there would not be enough water pressure.

GWIA, with the help of District 4 Supervisor Betsy Marchand and Supervisor Dave Rosenberg, who succeeded Ms. Marchand when she left office, worked together to form the Willowbank County Service Area (WCSA) Advisory Committee in the early 1990's to review the need for a reliable water system. The initial focus was digging one bigger and deeper well to serve all three neighborhoods. A well site was chosen and purchased by the County, located on Montgomery, taken from the rear side yard of the Clement family, 27482 Willowbank Rd. (This is now the site of the WCSA Community Bulletin Board.) After much research, however, the Committee became aware the City of Davis had an interest in closing their water loop between the New Willowbank subdivision (to the east) and the Oakshade subdivision (to the west). In 2000, Old Willowbank, joined the Davis water system.

There are 120 lots that make up Old Willowbank. All but a handful have homes built on them.

What sets this neighborhood apart? What brings people to this neighborhood...what is the Willowbank "feel"? The Greater Willowbank Newsletter dated January 10, 1989, states it best:

Mass trees and shrubbery  
Diverse architecture  
Large lot sizes  
No street lights or standard curbs

The rural feel and the community continues to draw like-minded folks.

The information contained herein  
Was gathered from previous  
historical articles written by  
Old Willowbank residents and  
from conversations with Old Willowbank residents.

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