

Historical Profile

The City of Oglesby is located in LaSalle County, just south of Interstate 80 and transected by Interstate 39. It is also located near the confluence of the Vermilion River and the Illinois River.

Upon the completion of the Illinois and Michigan Canal project in 1848, many communities in the Illinois Valley began to form along the then ninety-seven (97) mile waterway. One of these communities was Oglesby. The Illinois and Michigan Canal was vital because it provided a commercial route and the missing link between the Great Lakes and the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi River. The canal led first to the development of LaSalle, Peru, Utica, and Ottawa because of their close proximity to the waterway, but soon other towns began to emerge due to the establishment of coal mines and manufacturing plants.

Oglesby,
Our Home Town
1902 - 2002



Oglesby is named after Richard J. Oglesby, who was Commanding Officer of the 89th Illinois Infantry Regiment during the Civil War, as well as a U.S. Senator (1873-1879) and a three-term Governor of Illinois (1865-1869, 1872-1873, 1885-1889). Mr. T.T. Bent of the Oglesby Coal Company developed a coal mine south of the Illinois River near LaSalle and wished to call the town Kenosha after his own hometown in Wisconsin. However, this name was rejected due to the possible confusion of two towns with the same name. He then chose the name of Oglesby to honor Richard J. Oglesby, Governor and Commander. In 1902, the incorporation of a portion of the City was named Portland due to the prevalence of the cement industry in Oglesby. In 1913, the two separate communities of Portland and Oglesby were incorporated together as Oglesby.

Coal mining played an important role in the early history and settlement of the City. Three different companies operated mines in the Oglesby area: the Oglesby Coal Company operated the Bent Mine, the Illinois Zinc Company operated the Black Hollow Mine, and the Illinois Valley Coal Company operated the Jonesville Mine. The mines provided for much of the work and revenue throughout the late 1800's until 1930.

Many factors contributed to the end of coal mining in Oglesby. The Bent Mine was the first to close, in 1918, after years of litigation with the cement industry over

mining rights. The Black Hollow Mine closed in 1922 due to competition from non-union coal mines in the South. The last remaining mine, the Jonesville Mine, was closed in the 1930 when most of the coal was depleted and it became cost prohibitive to remove the remaining coal.

The cement industry has historically been a major fixture for Oglesby's economy, but after the decline of the coal industry, cement manufacturing became even more important. Two cement companies, the Lehigh Portland Cement Company and the Marquette Cement Company, operated simultaneously throughout Oglesby's history. Both companies had cement mines snaking underneath Oglesby until the early 1900's when mechanization made open pit mining more productive. The Lehigh Portland Cement Company began manufacturing cement in 1898 but closed permanently in 1963. The Marquette Cement Company (now Buzzi Unicem Industries), founded in 1892, is still in operation today as a distribution point and operates with a minimum workforce.



Oglesby founded their first church in 1868, Oglesby Union Church. This church got its start by holding Sunday school classes in a barn loft on the Oglesby Coal Company property. Next, O.L. Jones, owner of the Jonesville Mine, built the Jonesville Gospel Tabernacle in 1932 with the lumber from the dismantled coal mine company store. Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church was founded in 1900, then an accompanying school was built in 1903. The Oglesby Baptist Church began constructing their first building in 1908.

The newspaper in Oglesby, the *Oglesby Sentinel*, was short lived during the 1930's. It reported on local news, including school attendance, marriages, problems in the area businesses, visitors, and the daily happenings in the city of Oglesby. The only other newspaper on record is the very short-lived *Oglesby Shopper*.

Much of the original transportation systems, in the region, were based on the transit of goods to and from the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. The Illinois Central Railroad System, which opened in 1852 traveled from Bloomington through Oglesby to south of LaSalle. The main purpose was to get goods to and from the canal. The Chicago, Burlington, and Quincy line, which started in 1869, transported workers to and from LaSalle-Peru traveling through Streator, Kangley, Leonore, Deer Park, Oglesby, LaSalle, and Peru to Zearing along the Vermilion River.

The Dickinson House has been an important facility for the City of Oglesby. Miss Bertha K. Evans donated \$100,000 in 1940 to build a recreational center in memory

of Theodore G. Dickinson, who owned the Marquette Cement Manufacturing Company. This recreational center provided a space for vocational study, and recreational facilities to the men employed in Oglesby, along with their families. The Dickinson House is still in operation today providing a bowling alley, meeting rooms, dining room, and baseball diamonds for the public.

Oglesby is known as “The Shortcut to Starved Rock” and “The Closest City to Starved Rock.” Starved Rock State Park was purchased by the State of Illinois in 1911. The Park’s name is derived from Native American legend. According to the legend, in the 1760’s a band of Illiniwek sought refuge from a band of Potawatomi and Ottawa atop a sandstone butte. The Illiniwek remained surrounded until they starved to death, hence the name of Starved Rock. Starved Rock is a beautiful State Park that entices many visitors throughout the year. Oglesby is able to take advantage of its strategic location in relation to Starved Rock State Park, Matthiessen State Park, and Buffalo Rock State Park. The city is able to provide places to stay, eat, and shop for tourists and visitors.

In 2003, Oglesby received the Governor’s Home Town Award. This is awarded to “Citizens of Illinois who give unselfishly of their time, money and efforts to make their communities better places to live and work.” The city of Oglesby received the award for their collaboration in writing Oglesby Our Home Town about the history of the city to celebrate the town’s centennial in 2002 (this book is available at the Oglesby Public Library). Other hometown awards include a 1999 award for raising \$100,000 to build a new accessible library, a 1999 award for the construction of the Korean War Monument at Memorial Park (with the efforts of over 200 volunteers), and a 1982 award for the Celebration Day Festival.

Although not a large city, with a population of just under 3,700 people, Oglesby provides many great opportunities. A variety of industrial and commercial businesses provide a variety of jobs. There are four schools in Oglesby, Holy Family School (a private Catholic school), along with Washington School and Lincoln School (both public schools), and Illinois Valley Community College. More on the schools can be found in the Community Facilities section of this document.