CHAPTER TWO

Birth of a Village: The Lady Who Wouldn't Take 'No'

"Let me tell you a secret that has led me to my goal.
My strength lies solely in my tenacity."

Louis Pasteur

Dorothy Clark, the visionary behind Sunset Ridge School.

The first train came through Northfield in 1926, the same year the village was formed.

1924. The Roaring '20s. Chicago is a bustling city of nearly three million. Al Capone is building his empire. Northfield is a sleepy farmtown of 200. And the locals like it that way. But not Samuel Insull—one of three distinct characters in the '20s who would set the stage for Northfield's growth.

"A man of violent temper—and a lover of intricate finance," is the way one history book described Insull, a British-born entrepreneur who viewed himself as the most powerful man in Chicago.

His game in Northfield was Monopoly. Control the land, the railroad and utilities—maybe even the schools.

All for the goal of getting richer.

Insull dreamed of being a patron of the arts in Chicago. To that end, he built Chicago's Civic Opera House. But he was best known as a driving businessman who headed the Public Service Company of Illinois, later to become Commonwealth Edison.

Insull's plan was to build a chain of western suburbs like Northfield, Glenview and Morton Grove to attract new suburbanites who would buy electric power to profit his firm.

How to do that? You build an electric railroad so executives can commute to the city. So Insull did.

June 1926—the biggest month ever in Northfield. The first train on the Skokie Valley Electric Line pulled through the little unincorporated village, with Insull riding in the front car. He'd financed the railroad by selling bonds to small investors like Alex Levernier's sister-in-law, Elizabeth. She bought $800 worth of Insull's bonds. She was never repaid.

Insull rode high in Northfield—for awhile. The same year he brought the train, he helped force the issue of incorporating the little village into a real town.

With the help of real estate promoter George Nixon, he also began buying up land. Insull planned to sell lots both north and south of Willow in 50-foot parcels that hundreds of families could buy for ten dollars down. He and Nixon lured prospective buyers by offering free chicken dinners on Sunday. Visitors could tour four model homes that still stand on the corner of Bosworth and Dickens.

To sell land however, Insull needed a village. And maybe even a decent school.

His dream took shape with the help of a group of locals who began meeting at Northfield's first store, a grocery and tavern owned by Alex Levernier, located where the library and post office are today. Word around town was that Winnetka wanted to annex Northfield for the land and the tax dollars. Northfielders didn't feel strongly about having a town. But as their fear about Winnetka's advances mounted, so did the heat of their meetings at Al's store.

An election was finally held with 78 locals voting. The verdict was 63 to 15 in favor of a new village. On July 9, 1926, John Happ, grandson of the first settler, became the first president of the village, holding his first board meeting at Al Levernier's store.

Behind the scenes, however, Insull was still calling the shots. The village would be named "Wau Bun"—a name locals hated.

Horse-drawn wagons were common in the early 1900's on Kotz Road, named after farmer Charles Kotz. The road was renamed Sunset Ridge Road by a group of Winnetkans after they formed Sunset Ridge Country Club in 1923.

Locals had always loved to call their land "Skokie Swamp," because of the natural beauty of the marshy lagoons and wetlands along the Middlefork of the north branch of the Chicago River.

As Julia Donovan fondly recalled, "They used to call us the 'river folks'"—referring to Northfielders who crossed the Skokie Swamp to get to church or to the beach in a wagon.

But any reference to "swamp" enraged Insull. So in 1926, as he got ready to bring the first train into town, he held a contest in Chicago with a $100 prize to name the train station. The winning name was Wau Bun, an Indian word meaning "Dawn," and also the name of a Wisconsin Indian chief who camped in the area as part of the Potawatami tribe in the late 1700's.

Locals, when the name was announced, stayed silent.

Insull was forced to drop the name three years later. It happened after the village was formed on a day when Insull had driven into town to watch his train pull through the Wau Bun station. To his horror, the word "Wau" on the station sign had been changed to "Hot." Enraged at the sight of "Hot Bun," he ordered his real estate man Nixon to find a new name. And Northfield—referring to the community's location from Chicago and omitting reference to a swamp—was the natural choice for the train station and the town.

Along with the land and the town, Insull most likely had his hand in establishing a local school board. After all, you couldn't sell land without a bona fide school district. And District 29 hadn't progressed much from the days Al Levernier chased Old Maid Donovan's cow.

New Trier High School, opened in 1901, had gained a national reputation by now. And Carlton Washburne's teaching methods were putting Winnetka's public schools on the map.

One native Northfielder, Richard Burmeister, whose dad owned a farm on the corner of Sunset Ridge and Happ Road, stretching all the way to where Edens Highway is today, remembers his parents pulling him out of Brown School in the early '20s so he could go to the more progressive schools in Northbrook.

"Brown School was kind of a shack," Burmeister recalls. "We'd all sit together in one room. And I can remember one kid—the class pest—who'd lean out of his seat when the teacher wasn't looking and stick his fingers up his nose, making the most awful faces. I'm 86. And I still remember it like yesterday."

Samuel Insull could well have helped force the issue of making District 29 into a local district, meaning that citizens finally had more say in education. April 12, 1924, wasn't a date widely known or celebrated. But with a total enrollment of 13 boys and 5 girls—and the probable prodding of Samuel Insull—Northfielders for the first time elected their own three-member school board and ran their own school.

Nothing much else changed at Brown School in the '20s. It amused Winnetkans who would drive through town and see the funny pump on the corner of Sunset and Willow, next to the little school with no plumbing. And more Winnetkans *were* driving into town. Land to build Sunset Ridge Country Club —the property once owned by John Brown— had been purchased by ten Winnetka families. As one Northfield historian, Mary Hobart, explained, "Winnetkans wanted a place to play golf—and they were tired of waiting for someone to die so they could get into Indian Hill Club."

The little Brown School, around 1905. The school teacher always boarded with Julia Donovan, one of the early settlers who lived in a log cabin across the street.

Winnetkans liked the little town to the west with its rolling hills and undeveloped land—the same way Northfield farmers loved their land. But the little school on the corner didn't change. Locals liked Brown School just fine.

The seeds of change that would lead to the dismantling of the old Brown School and the opening of Sunset Ridge School in 1930 were planted about a mile north, on Old Hunt Road.

It was here, in 1922, that a 16-acre farm was purchased by Harold Clark, an executive with the Chicago Rawhide Company and an inventor with the "Midas Touch," and his stunning, determined wife, Dorothy.

They built a nine-bedroom mansion—complete with swimming pool, manicured lawns, a chauffeur, butler, cook and nannies for each of their three children. Summers were spent touring Europe. Winters were spent at a second home in Miami. But Dorothy loved her Northfield land. And she wanted to see it developed right.

As one neighbor, Nancy McFarland Clark, recalls, "No one could deny Dorothy. She had the money, talent and drive to get what she wanted. And she always knew the right thing to do."

Education was in Dorothy's blood. Her father, who had died when she was in her teens, had been a college professor. Dorothy had studied at Bryn Mawr. Her stepfather was a well-to-do farmer who moved the family to the country—to Gilman, Illinois.

"None of us had ever lived in the country before," her sister, Shirley Ryan, recalls. "But Dorothy loved the beauty and excitement of converting farmland into a new generation of beautiful homes."

A love of the arts, education, architecture and the land—all prerequisites for her zeal in planning Sunset Ridge School.

But first, there was the Brown School to contend with.

"If it were my choice," her sister admits, "I'd have sent my children to a private school. Just forget that place on the corner. But Dorothy wanted a beautiful, first-class school for her town."

A lot of the inspiration for Dorothy's dream came from a teacher she had met after placing an ad for a housekeeper in the local paper. Dorothy needed someone to manage her entourage of chauffeurs, cooks, butlers and nannies while she and her husband summered in Europe. The ad drew a Mrs. Louise Cray, mother of four, and wife of William Cray, who in 1924 was principal of Northbrook School.

While the Clarks made ends meet on resources that would make the average Northfield farmer gasp, the Crays were raising four children on a teacher's income of about $150 a month. So Mrs. Cray took the summer job with the Clarks while her husband stayed home with the kids.

"Dorothy absolutely loved the Crays," her sister recalls. "And she promised Mr. Cray: 'If you will come to Northfield and teach here, I will build a school for you.'"

And she did. In 1929, the Crays left Northbrook to move into the original farmhouse that still stood on the Clark's land.

Heading up Brown School was clearly a step *down* for William Cray. With 29 students to teach, he had no staff. No real building. No supplies. He was janitor, music teacher, art teacher—and the only instructor of grades one through eight. He

BOY, 14, CARRIES OFF HONORS IN SPELLING BEE

Know Their Webster

BOY DEFEATS GIRLS

William Cray (right), son of principal William Cray, brought honor to District 29 by winning the annual Cook County Spelling Bee in 1930.

walked two miles each day to get from Dorothy Clark's property to Brown School and back. He couldn't afford a car. His starting salary was $175 a month.

One of the attractions of coming to Northfield for Cray was the opportunity to spend his summers studying under Winnetka's Carlton Washburne, by now a nationally renowned leader in education. But Cray found he didn't always agree with Washburne's thinking. Washburne, for example, wanted to give kids free reign without a firm hand or boundaries. While Cray admired and drew on Washburne's progressive ideas—such as setting individual goals for students, rather than just ranking them with a letter grade—he had different ideas about how children should act. In the classroom, he insisted on discipline and respect.

"It was serious, old-fashioned strictness," recalls former student Nancy McFarland Clark. "Mr. Cray was a hard-working scholar. You really toed the line. But he was also very kind—and sweet. I was sick quite a bit as a child, and I remember him coming to my house to tutor me. He always made you want to be your best. And when Mr. Cray said something—boy, you did it."

Adds Richard Burmeister, who had Cray while attending Northbrook School, "Cray really paid attention to what he was doing. He was good. He was strict. You *had* to be."

Signs of the new academic standards Cray brought to the district were evident in the first year he came. That year the Chicago *Tribune* proclaimed Brown School as the winner of the annual Cook County Spelling Bee. Even more amazing, according to the paper—the winner was a boy.

"Girls, judging from the preponderance of their numbers, are superior in the art of spelling to boys," said the Chicago *Herald American*, in another story about the District 29 win. Asked to explain *why* girls were better spellers, the Cook County Superintendent of Schools said that boys, "were inclined to question everything and be a bit rebellious."

Cray's son took top honors that year and the next year, his daughter won. The publicity inspired classmates and the community. "It was a big deal," recalls Julia Cray Kennedy. "You went to my father's school—you learned to spell." District 29 was coming into its own.

While Cray was bringing these values to education, Dorothy Clark was bringing her best to build the new school. But first, there was a clash over the need to build one at all.

The three members of District 29's board didn't see why taxes should be raised to build a new school. So a "pro-school" citizens committee was formed. Both sides rang every doorbell in town.

The controversy got so heated that pro-school citizens were locked out of Brown School one evening when they came to meet. Attorneys were called and board members bowed to the law.

The pro-school campaign got a boost from a priest at St. Norbert's parish, where children of the Happs and other residents went to school. The priest promised that members of his parish would vote "yes." Farmers were also swayed by pro-school advocate

A natural athlete, Betty Horsman Heffner joined District 29 in 1933. She taught first, second and third grade and also launched the first Sunset Ridge sports program in her Chevy with a rumble seat.

Tom McKearnan, who liked to ride horses and fox hunt on their land—and also knew where to get very good Prohibition gin.

An election was held and the "yes" vote won. The old board of early settlers was out and a new three-member "pro-school" board of newcomers was in. Tom McKearnan gained a seat, and so did Syles Fralick, a hard-driving Chicago businessman who lived in the same home the David Ellis family does today.

When electricity was first brought into the village in the '20s, Fralick put down several thousand dollars of his own to extend the power lines to the farms spanning Sunset Ridge and Happ Roads. "I remember Fralick convincing my dad to chip in some money to help," recalls Richard Burmeister. "He told us, 'Once those farmers try milking cows by light-bulb rather than lantern, we'll get our investment back.'" And they did—within six months.

A third new board member was Charles Hough who built the house at 340 Maple Row now owned by the Richard Riesers. Herb Graffis, a sports-writer with the Chicago *Sun Times*, would join the board a few years later. And Dorothy Clark, a decade later, would have her turn on the board as well.

But first, Dorothy had a job to do: build the school. She enlisted Ernest Benkert, a prominent North Shore architect, to design the elegant building which had the feel of a warm, New England school. Two classrooms, two separate teacher's offices, a basement, pine paneled walls with wood imported from England, a stunning colonial fire-place and wall-to-wall patterned carpet-ing—unheard of among township schools in that day.

Ground was formally broken in 1929, just to the north of Brown School.

"The county inspectors couldn't believe it," recalls Cray's youngest daughter, Julia Cray Kennedy, who graduated from Sunset Ridge in 1936. "That building was one in a million—everything a rural school shouldn't have been!"

"It was such a beautiful school," adds Nancy McFarland Clark. "The minute you walked in, it felt like home."

Winnetkans indirectly had a hand in the school's name. After launching Sunset Ridge Country Club in 1923, they renamed what had always been Kotz Road, for farmer Charles Kotz, to Sunset Ridge Road. The school took the name as well.

Dorothy Clark accomplished her dream with Sunset Ridge. It was every-thing she had hoped. And with the open-ing of the new school in 1930, Cray would no longer be a one-man-band. He got help—in the form of a teacher for the first, second and third grades, Betty Horsman Heffner. She joined the district in 1933. If ever there was a dream team—this was it.

Betty had been born in Winnetka. A graduate of New Trier, she was high-spirited, energetic and full of fun. A natural athlete, she also played the piano Children loved her humor, enthusiasm and warmth. She and Cray were a good blend.

Cray spent his summers teaching Shakespeare to his children, combing newspapers to keep abreast of current events and tending his garden, which he loved. A born scholar and teacher, he lived a quiet life of intellectual pursuit.

Betty on the other hand liked to board the train each summer and head for a

The 1930 Brown School graduating class–the last to attend before the school was torn down and replaced by Sunset Ridge School. Principal William Cray joined District 29 in 1929 and served until 1942.

ranch in Arizona. There, she'd mingle with the Indians and watch authentic snakedances, riding her horse 50 miles a day. At the end of the summer she'd board the train for home—and bring it all back to her Sunset Ridge classroom.

Orange crates in those days were a teacher's best friend. Former students still remember Betty's Indian teepee, built of orange crates and brown paper. If kids were especially good, they could climb on top and read.

Betty also had a car with a rumble seat. And that was the beginning of the Sunset Ridge sports program. Students would pile into her Chevy and head for St. Norbert's where they competed in baseball.

The '30s were good years for Sunset Ridge and for Northfield—although the Depression dampened some of the momentum. "By the time we moved into the new school," Julia Cray Kennedy recalls, "everyone was broke."

Cray took a pay cut. His salary in 1931 went from $240 a month to $215. His annual contract that year had a handwritten note: "This contract subject to cancellation at any time if financial condition of district makes any such action necessary."

The note also made Cray responsible for the condition of all the buildings and grounds.

Land values, up to $1,500 an acre before the Depression, went flat. About half the acreage in town reverted back to the original owners, who again possessed their most valuable asset.

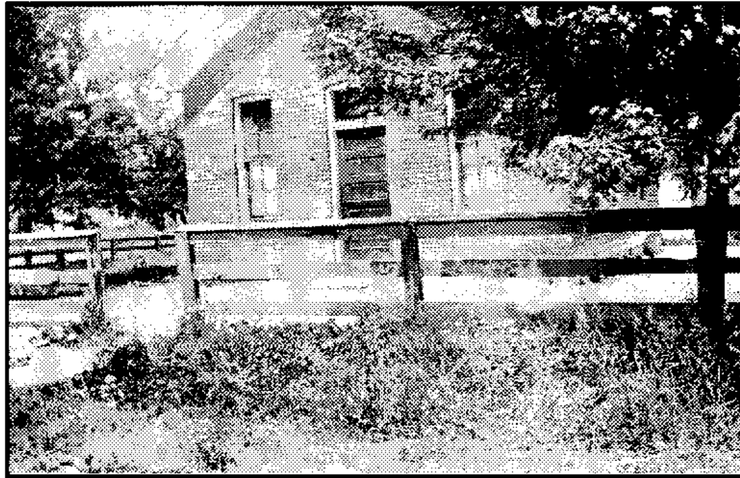
The notorious Samuel Insull was gone for good. With the Depression, his empire collapsed. "Thousands of small investors, to whom the power man had been a kind of god, lost everything," says *Chicago, A Pictorial History*. Insull fled to Europe, where he was arrested and brought back to trial for mail fraud by the Cook County State's Attorney. "I have committed no crime," he told his captors. "I just lost lots of money—more than $100 million of my own." He returned to Chicago for trial in 1934. Although acquitted, he was now an object of ridicule in the city he'd once boasted he owned. Insull died in 1938, leaving debts and disappointed bondholders. Among them was Mrs. Elizabeth Levernier of Northfield.

As the town emerged from the Depression, families from other North Shore towns began to move to Northfield. But the original settlers like the Happs, Brachtendorfs, Donovans and Metz's still loved their land—and each other.

The spirited Lucy Brachtendorf, by now viewed as "well-to-do" by the original farm families, stayed close to her shy, quiet neighbor Julia Donovan, who smoked a clay pipe like her mom and lived in her tidy log cabin without plumbing, electricity or central heat.

"I guess I'm a little wild—even today," Julia would confess in 1937 at age 85. "I like the country out here, and all that grows around the place."

Lucy never had a formal education, but she proudly subscribed to the *Tribune* and shared her copy with the Metz's. She liked having modern conveniences like a gas stove. She took pride in her spacious home and her lush purple iris and clematis flowers. "She was a whirlwind—interested in everyone," recalls a former neighbor, Ruth Ahrens Hacker. "But Lucy's garden was her greatest joy."



Brown School in the late 1920's. It was torn down in the summer of 1930 to make way for the new Sunset Ridge School. But the little hand-pump on the corner, a symbol of Northfield's past, remained for decades.

Across the street from her home, on land just east of Sunset Ridge School, Lucy owned a few acres of cornfield and horse pasture.

The school board wanted this land. Enrollment was growing. More classrooms and playground area would soon be needed. Property at the time was selling for about $1,000 an acre.

Board minutes from 1935 address the issue of getting Lucy to talk to the board.

By 1937, the board was still trying. Minutes report: "It was suggested that Mr. Happ see Miss Brachtendorf and affect an amicable settlement."

Several months later, the results: "Miss Brachtendorf...was very antagonistic at first but later became more amenable." Her asking price—$2,500 an acre or $4,000 for two—"was considered unreasonably high and probably said merely in the heat of anger," the minutes say. The board believed, however, that "progress had been made."

A month later: "Little progress was made." Lucy upped her price by another $500 an acre. Talks ended. "It was the general sentiment of the meeting that the asking price was much too high."

The board and Lucy didn't see eye-to-eye for years. Perhaps Lucy's lack of formal education made her wary of being outmaneuvered by anyone—especially the vanguard of newcomers in the community who sat on the District 29 board. At the same time, she was a great admirer of William Cray. She had known his wife's family as a young girl, and was pleased when he'd come to visit, sitting on her front porch to chat.

In 1941, the two sides struck an agreement. The school got the land.

But in 1937, as they still struggled with the problem of overcrowding—and no funds to build more classrooms—the board tried another idea: get help from the Public Works Administration (PWA) to expand the school. Three months after that idea was announced, minutes report getting "...a letter from the PWA returning our application and saying that they cannot take any more applications."

At a packed board meeting in June 1937, the board finally solved what minutes call "the growing school requirements resulting from the rapid growth of the community." Their answer? Send 6th, 7th and 8th grade students to Skokie School, using taxes to pay transportation costs and the $221-per-student tuition. "The audience was unanimously in favor of this plan," minutes report. "Word was received at the meeting that the Winnetka board would approve our action."

For Nancy McFarland Clark, leaving Sunset Ridge after 5th grade was tough. "You missed the warmth and family feeling of that pretty little school with Miss Horsman and Mr. Cray."

Sunset Ridge wouldn't serve all eight grades again until 1954.

All through the '30s, the influx into Northfield grew. "People thought we were crazy," says Roberta Nichols, whose family built the first home on Dickens Road off Winnetka Avenue in 1936, right behind Seul's farmhouse, on property once owned by the failed empire of Samuel Insull. "There wasn't a tree in sight," she says of the former horseradish farm. "But my parents loved the land."

So did the City of Chicago.

Northfield was still so remote in the '30s that Judy Blake Ives, class of 1940,

Students on the playground at the newly built Sunset Ridge School in 1931. The principal's daughter, Julia Cray, is in the second row, far left. Her dad William Cray is standing, far right

remembers going pheasant hunting with her dad in the open fields where Thackeray, Bosworth and Ingram are today. Their outing was ruined when they ran into a crew of laborers with tractors, mysteriously loading the area's rich, black topsoil into trucks.

The City of Chicago, they later learned, was "borrowing" the dirt for the 1933-34 Chicago World's Fair.

"I think the city fathers figured: 'Go to the most remote place you can think of.' And no one, they bet, would ever live here!" says Ives.

She went to the World's Fair that year, along with 39 million other visitors. "My dad kept reminding me: 'That's Northfield soil you're walking on!'"

Despite the rustic appeal of the town, the dichotomy between the old-timers and newcomers was clear.

Dorothy Clark's fabulous schoolhouse boasted all the basics like plumbing, electricity and running water. But the founding families who surrounded the school lived without such conveniences.

For example, Judy Ives' father was a successful dentist who'd moved from Wilmette in 1933 to build his dream home on a double lot on Thornwood Lane where the John Beattys live today.

Just south of Judy Ives was her classmate, Ruth Ahrens, great-granddaughter of Carl Metz. She lived in a third-generation farmhouse with an outhouse and pump on Old Willow Road.

Ruth's father struggled to make ends meet, raising chickens and hay. It was a hard life, Ruth remembers. Her mom labored in the fields with her dad. And her grandmother cooked on an old wood stove, doing laundry on a washboard on the porch.

When they needed money to pay property taxes, they sold their land. The original 13 acres Carl Metz staked out in 1861 in Northfield had, by 1933, dwindled to three.

Judy Ives remembers the glorious hours she spent at Ruth's farm feeding the chickens, planting corn and radishes and working at the family's vegetable stand.

Ruth remembers how she felt when her mom picked her up at school in a 'Model T.'

"All the other families had much fancier cars," she recalls. "When it rained and I couldn't walk to school, I'd duck in the back seat of mom's car and hide."

The Ahrens ran a truck farm on their property through the late '50s. It was known throughout the North Shore for having the most succulent fresh corn and vegetables. Spectacular flower gardens, planted by Ruth's mother, graced Old Willow Road. Sunset Ridge kids routinely stopped by the farm to gather eggs, pet the horses and play with the baby pigs.

Northfield's farmland also lured local equestrians. It was a stunning sight in the '30s to watch riders in their brilliant red coats gallop across the Brachtendorf and Metz farmland with their hounds and horses in pursuit of the fox.

Farm families like the Ahrens, Donovans and Brachtendorfs stayed close through the '30s and '40s. When the cold winters became unbearable for Julia Donovan and the water in her house froze, Ruth's mother brought warm food and helped tend Julia's chickens while she stayed with a nearby relative for the night.

Julia would lament at age 85 how when she was young, "It seemed as though

Lifelong friends and neighbors Julia Donovan *(left)* and Lucy Brachtendorf spent ninety years together in Northfield, watching the town emerge from a remote outpost in the 1860's to a thriving village. Julia called Northfielders the "river folks."

everyone was always singing or whistling. And they don't do that today." But Julia's neighbor, Ruth Ahrens Hacker, remembered Julia's constant hum long after she died at age 91 in 1941.

"We were always," says Ruth, "there for each other."

As William Cray started his second decade at Sunset Ridge in 1939, the community and nation faced another threat: war.

"My dad used to lecture the older students about current events," recalls his daughter Julia. "Since we had five classes in one room, younger kids like me would eavesdrop on what he was saying. It was so much more interesting than doing math tables!"

She remembers Cray's perception of Hitler. "I can still see him telling the older Sunset Ridge students, around 1934: 'He's a madman! Hitler's not to be listened to or trusted!'"

By 1942, with the nation at war, Cray was fighting a different battle. A stroke crippled him, forcing him to leave Sunset Ridge. He never returned to teaching.

Board minutes show Mrs. Cray asking the school for some financial support as her husband's health declined. But there was nothing, the board said, it could do.

The next year, health insurance policies were required for all teachers.

Dorothy Clark, now a member of the board, took on the cause of finding a new principal. She remained a lifelong friend of the Crays.