

“The City Moved to us” (Swanton)

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Drive east twenty-minutes from downtown Madison to the intersection of Milwaukee Street and Swanton Road. Under the Land Ordinance of 1785 and after this area was first purchased in 1837, this land was known as the W ½ of NW ¼ of Section three of Township 7 North and Range 10 East in the Town of Blooming Grove. Today, you will see three new houses and construction beginning on two more. The current owners of the land, Greg and Corine Thompson, sold the land to a developer who began the construction earlier this year. Why is this construction happening now and not in 1962 when the city of Madison moved in on the land? The answer is because Milo Swanton owned the land until 1993. Only forty-one years ago, he worked this land as a productive and sustainable farm and the land would not look as it does today without that history. Today, the houses from four different eras, the trees from the old orchard, the remnants of the farm vegetable garden, and the road system are legacies left from Swanton's farm.

Milo Swanton's farm first belonged to his father. The family moved to the area in 1896 and sometime between 1899 and 1902 Robert Swanton bought this eighty acres as extra farmland from a farmer named Heath (Dane and Platt). The family mainly had a dairy and livestock farm but also grew a large variety of crops. Tobacco was the main cash crop in the area ever since the 1840s. The Hiestand family immigrated to Blooming Grove from Ohio in the late 1840s and brought with them the knowledge of cultivating tobacco (Swanton). The other crops the Swantons grew consisted of corn, wheat, hay, alfalfa, potatoes, barley, apples, pears, and cherries. The livestock included Durham cattle for beef and dairy, hogs, chickens, turkeys, and horses. Robert Swanton sold chickens, butter, milk, eggs, beef, turkeys, hogs, potatoes, tobacco, and hay for cash. Most of those items he sold to regular customers but Milo and his father would also drive into Madison with a horse and buggy to sell turkeys, hay, and butter at the farmers'

market on Saturday mornings (Swanton). Milo continued to raise most of the crops and livestock from his father's farm including 4-5 acres of tobacco, alfalfa, apples, pears, cherries, hogs, Guernsey cows for dairy, beef cattle, horses and much more (Swanton). Milo Swanton did not continue to make butter on his farm, but instead sold milk to the city folks in Madison.

A passer-by would never realize this area was a farm but the first evidence is Milo Swanton's farmhouse (see photos A and A2). The land would not look as it does today without his house. Swanton built it and began to farm the land in 1919 (City). The house has a side and upstairs porch and is much taller than the surrounding newer homes. The backyard has a clothesline for drying the farm family's clothing before the era of electric drying machines.

Secondly, the smaller house at 10 Swanton Road does not fit in with the older farmhouse or the new houses surrounding it. This house exists and is in its current location because the land was a farm. It was built in 1941 on a different part of the farm for the hired farm hand (City and Nesbit). After Milo Swanton retired from farming in 1966, he sold his farmland to a developer and the hired man's house was moved to 10 Swanton Road to rent out to families. Maps from 1971 show the house at its current location (Platt at Historic Blooming Grove). This part of the land is especially important to me because I grew up in it. My parents rented the little house from the Swantons from 1979 until 1992.

Third, you will notice the houses to the east of Swanton's farmhouse that appear to be of suburban construction. They would not be in those particular locations if Swanton had not held onto the land until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Most of the houses on his old farmland were built between 1972 and 1977 (City). The houses are almost identical except for the color of paint, the location of the front door, and the location of the garage (photo B). They are a symbol of the suburban-kind of fast construction popular in the post World War II era.

The Thompsons bought the entire 2.5 acres in December of 2002 (Thompson). The Thompsons sold the land to another developer who built new houses on all three sides surrounding the old farmhouse (photo C). The new houses also all look similar, much like the suburban houses built in the 1970s. The new garage for Swanton's old farmhouse is ironically termed a "barn" by some of the locals (Schaefer, Paul). The old garage will be turned around and put with one of the new houses (photo D). The Thompsons are going to rent out some of the houses and sell the others (Schaefer, Paul).

Besides the houses from four different eras, four trees stand near the corner of Boynton Place and Swanton Road, seemingly out of place with the rest of the lawn (photo E). One is a pine, one is a gooseberry, one is an apple tree, and the other is a pear tree. The trees look very old. In fact, they were planted early in Milo Swanton's farming career in the 1920s. The apple and pear trees remain as legacies of his farm orchard (Nesbit). The orchard also had cherry and plum trees. The trees were in rows and one row went down what is now Boynton Place. On the other side of the street, now in another person's yard, an apple tree from the original orchard survived until recently. The cherry tree was cut down a few years ago. Swanton grew the fruit for his family to eat and also sold them to families in the area. Presumably, Swanton also sold them at the downtown farmers' market where his father had sold a variety of crops and livestock products (Swanton). Another phase of this land's cycle is beginning: a red sign on the corner declares, "For sale by owner." If the land is sold, the trees might be bulldozed to make room for another house.

Behind the new houses on Milwaukee Street are three separate remnants of the farm vegetable garden that stand as evidence of the land's past productivity. First, grape vines cover a little white fence with 5 posts (photo F). Three fences with grapes once stood on this land but the

grapes vines still visible have grown there for years, possibly since the 1950s (Nesbit).

Swanton's tenants from the house on 10 Swanton Road would help to harvest the grapes for canning, to make jelly and juice, and for other uses (personal remembrance). Second, behind the grape vines, green posts and wire surround a berry patch filled with blackberries, raspberries, and blackcaps (photo G). The berries are still alive and growing fruit next to the old garden plot. The Swanton's would also harvest the berries for homemade jams, jellies, and pies. Third, a large dirt pile with a few plants still growing in it is next to the berry patch (photo H). It was a much larger, productive farm vegetable garden from 1919 until around 1996 (Nesbit). After the Swantons grew too old to use the garden, the tenants and other friends grew corn, asparagus, potatoes, carrots, pumpkins, peas, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, beans, squash, parsnips, cucumbers, beets, kohlrabi, broccoli, Brussels spouts, and onions for household consumption and to share with the Swantons. Some time after 1996, part of the garden was grassed over and now it's only a pile of dirt. Corine Thompson, one of the current owners of the old farmhouse, explained, "They're putting a house on it."

In the earlier era, the people here on this land produced much of their own food and used the roads to sell the extra goods at the market. However, now the people on the land grow grass and ironically, use the roads to go to the market to buy food. You can notice the roads around the area are set up in a rectangle resembling the edges of Swanton's original over eighty acre farm. The grid system of land surveying created the rectangle before the speculator bought it in 1837. The main roads are located at the juncture of two previous farms (Swanton). The roads were vital to the farmers in the area so they could travel to market. With horse-drawn graders and scrapers, the farmers themselves built the early roads. Around 1915 the roads were gravel but new technology, the automobile, sped up the road improvements and eventually the roads were paved

(Swanton). Swanton's old farmhouse faces Milwaukee Street but the farm's address was Rural Route 4 until 1959 (Treleven, *Interview 4*). Swanton declares in his interview in 1975, "We did not move to the city, but the city moved to us." The City of Madison annexed the area in 1962. Swanton road was constructed by 1963 with the side roads through Swanton's land constructed at least by 1976, when the houses on those streets appeared.

If these eighty acres, now on the eastside of the city of Madison, had not been a farm forty-one years ago, they would not have the shape or buildings they have today. Humans are constantly changing and developing this land and in general, humans are constantly changing and developing all land. This region has a cyclical history, passing from one developer to another. A land speculator first purchased this area as 640 acres in August of 1837 (Historic). The speculator sold the land to farmers for development. Sometime between 1966 and 1971 Swanton sold most of the land to a developer. This developer, however, sold the land for houses, not for farms. People affected by the market and economic forces, also the factors behind Swanton's farming, are changing the land once again. The current owners sold the land to another developer earlier this year and more houses were built. The economy, population, and housing demand in Dane County are fantastically increasing. So while the acres are sold from one human to another, hopefully we will not forget the rich history of the land itself.

Works Consulted

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Treleven, Dale. *Interview introduction and abstract of Milo K. Swanton*. 1976. Wisconsin State Historical Society-Folder on Milo K. Swanton.

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A Timeline of the History of this Land Intertwined with Individual's Lives

Dane County, Town of Blooming Grove
Township 7 North, Range 10 East. W ½ of NW ¼ Section 3, 82 acres

12/7/1836 Dane county established
8/10/1837 land purchased as 640 acres
5/1/1839 Dane county formally organized
Township organized in 1850

1853: Robert Swanton, Milo's father, born in Waukesha County, Wisconsin
~1861: Dean house (4718 Monona Drive) taking tenant farmers (Milo Swanton's Mother lived in the Dean House as a little girl)
1861: Perneroy owns Milo's farmland
1873: Heath owns Milo's farmland
Nov 27, 1894: Milo Swanton born in Sun Prairie
1896: Robert Swanton moves to area and buys the family farm area (across Milwaukee St. from Milo's farm: 4709 Milwaukee St.)
Between 1899 and 1902: Robert Swanton buys Milo's future farm from Heath
1899(?)-1908(?): Milo attends Hiestand school, one room schoolhouse on 4400 block of Milwaukee St. still standing. Originally built around 1855, but razed and rebuilt to modernize it in 1915
1902: First telephone on the home farm, 4709 Milwaukee St.
1907: First time Robert Swanton is in the phone book
1908-1912: Milo goes to high school at Wisconsin Academy in Madison
1912(?): Robert Swanton builds a new house (according to Milo Swanton's tape)-city assessor's office says it was built in 1905
1913: First got electric lights at home farm, 4709 Milwaukee St.
1914: Robert Swanton gets a Buick car
May 18, 1917: Robert Swanton dies
1919: Swanton brothers split the home farmland. Milo Swanton takes over his plot on a rental basis-dairy and livestock
1919: Milo's farmhouse built, 4610 Milwaukee St.
1920s: increase in fertilizer use on local farms
Later 1920s: increase in tractors on local farms
1928: Gas and Electric builds line out to the Blooming Grove farms
Sometime between 1920s and 1960s: Milo gets as much as 139 acres
1932-1935: depression hits the farms in the area
1941: House standing at 10 Swanton Road is built
1948: Milo Swanton and Irene Olson (?) get married
1959: Swanton assigned a Milwaukee St. address
1962: City of Madison annexed area, Milo cash crops only
1963: Swanton Rd. on the map
1966: Milo stops cash crop farming altogether
1971: House at 10 Swanton Road is located at 10 Swanton Road on a map (moved to that spot previously)
1971: Karmenta nursing home built (probably on Swanton's old land)
Before 1972 Milo sells land to developer
1975-76: Milo's Interview on tape at Wisconsin Historical Society
1975: The city begins developing Hiestand Park
April 19, 1976: Hiestand schoolhouse designated a Madison landmark by the Madison Landmarks Commission
1976: most of the houses built on Milo's farm property

1979-1992: Author's parents live at 10 Swanton Rd

1983: Septic tank left in the ground at 10 Swanton Rd., but the city sewer is hooked up

1993: Milo Swanton dies

Marie Wilke (?) buys the land

Dec 2002: Thompson's move in, buy for around \$500,000

2003: Begin constructing 3-5 new houses on land. New garage for the Farmhouse

mid 2003: tear off garage at 10 Swanton Rd.

Dec 2003: Schaefer's buy 10 Swanton Rd. house for \$127,000



Photo A- Milo Swanton's old farmhouse -built in 1919



Photo A2-Back of Milo Swanton's farmhouse



Photo B- Suburban-type houses on Boynton Place



Photo C- New house juxtaposed with Swanton's old farmhouse



Photo D- Old garage with new garage in background



Photo F- Grapevine with new houses in background



Photo E- 2 old orchard trees with 10 Swanton Rd to the left in the background



Photo G- Berry patch



Photo H- Old garden plot with old farmhouse to the right, and new houses to the left