

1900's Clinton County

Life during the 1900's can be summed up in one word - change.

Improved Travel

During the first part of the 1900's Clinton County moved from horses to new, faster ways to travel.

The first tracks were laid for the Lansing to St. Johns interurban train in May of 1901. By July the train was running between DeWitt and Lansing. On February 1, 1902, the first train reached St. Johns with stops every mile. The interurban was powered by overhead electric lines.

People could now travel from St. Johns to Lansing in an hour.



Interurban crossing the Looking Glass River at DeWitt



Interurban on Clinton Ave., St. Johns

Along with people, the train also transported mail and cargo. The last train ran on May 29, 1929. The reason it stopped was because a new type of travel, the automobile, had become popular.

The first cars arrived in the early 1900's. By the 1920's many people had traded in their horse and buggy for a car. Many people no longer needed a horse and buggy. A car was much easier to take care of. It didn't need to be fed and cared for every day. Plus, cars let you get to places faster than with a horse.

As more people bought cars, they wanted smooth roads to travel on. Main roads began to be paved and given names like M-21, M-104, US-16. and US-27. By the end of the century all of the main roads were paved and some freeways had been built. It was now easy to go anywhere in the county.

The first airport in Clinton County was in Watertown Township from 1922-1926. In 1926 it was replaced by Capital City Airport in DeWitt Township.

Clinton County had two early daredevils.

Philip Orin Parmelee was born in Matherton and grew up in St. Johns. He was an early pilot. He was taught to fly by the Wright Brothers. Philip was called Skyman and held many world flying records.

Clem Sohn was from Fowler. He would jump from planes wearing a wing suit and glide toward the ground. Some people called him the Batman or Birdman. When he got close to the ground, he would open a parachute.



Ovid, Michigan



Clem Sohn

Changes on the Farm

Farm life was also changing. Farmers began using tractors instead of horses. Tractors let them have larger farms. As the farms got bigger not as many people became farmers.

Since it was easy to go to town to shop, some farmers stopped raising animals. Others grew just a few crops or a single animal.

Farm kids had fewer chores so they had time for sports, 4-H, and scouts.

Clinton County has a lot of rich, black soil that is perfect for raising mint. The first mint farm began in 1913 and soon others were growing mint. The oil is removed from the mint plants in a still. More mint is grown here than anywhere else in Michigan. St. Johns has a Mint Festival every August.



Enzie Walter Viges, his son, Edgar Gordon
and new Farmall tractor



Crosby Mint Still

Others decided to become dairy farmers. Cheese and milk plants were built in Elsie and Ovid. Every year Elsie has a Dairy Festival in July.

New Inventions

Life became easier, especially for those who were living in towns. Towns began to build waterworks in the late 1800's. The water was pumped from wells and sent through pipes to homes and businesses. People could have indoor bathrooms instead of outhouses.

Electricity and telephones also came to towns in the late 1800's, but most people didn't have them until the 1900's. Electric generators made electricity which traveled through wires. Telephone and electric wires were attached to poles which were put along streets. Wires also went to homes and businesses. With electricity came lightbulbs and electric motors. Telephones allowed people to talk without writing a letter and waiting for an answer.

Towns Grow

Many people moved away from farms and started working in towns and cities. New stores were built and people would drive to town for shopping. Some people had jobs in Lansing making cars or working for the State. Others took on new jobs like truck drivers, mechanics, and gas station workers.



Clinton Avenue, St. Johns - Christmas Shopping 1940's

New Kinds of Entertainment

By the early 1900's silent movies were being shown in St. Johns, Ovid, and Elsie. In the late 1920's movies added sound. Going to the movies became a popular family entertainment. During the 1930's it cost 25 cents for adults and 10 cents of children to see a movie.

There were indoor movie theaters in DeWitt, Elsie, Fowler, Maple Rapids, Ovid, and St. Johns. Outdoor drive-in theaters were in DeWitt and St. Johns.

Radio arrived in the 1920's. Families would gather around the radio and listen to news, music, and plays. When you listened to the plays you had to make the pictures in your mind, just like when you read a story. The first radio station in Clinton County didn't arrive until 1959. Before then people listened to stations from Lansing and other towns.



The first television stations began in the early 1950's. TV was only in black and white, not color. Back then most people could only watch 2 or 3 channels. If you wanted to watch TV you needed to have an antenna on the roof of your house.

There was no Internet until the late 1990's.

Schools Change

Schools also changed. In the early 1900's most students only went to school through 8th grade. After 8th grade they would get a job and start working. By the 1940's most went to high school as the new jobs needed people with more education.

Buses made it possible for farm kids to ride into town for school. One-room schools started closing and sending their students to town schools. The last one-room school closed in 1967.

Clinton County Today

Clinton County has had many changes. Two hundred years ago it was mostly forest with a few Ojibwe and French traders traveling along rivers and narrow trails. Today we have many farms, businesses, towns, and wide roads that cross the county. What hasn't changed is Clinton County is still a great place to live.