

CHAPTER XI

"The transformation of Avon..."

THE TRANSFORMATION of Avon in the years following the Second World War was caused by two unrelated factors. The first was the decline of the Brockton area shoe industry. Lured away from the Northeast by promises of tax rebates and large pools of non-union labor, many shoemakers left the area for other states. This, combined with foreign imports, antiquated production methods, and a lack of foresight on the part of factory owners, doomed an industry which had been the economic backbone of the region. While some Avon residents continued to work at Bows Moccasin or at the Avon Sole Company, never again would the shoe trade dominate the economy of the village as it had for the previous century.

The second agent of change was the transportation revolution which occurred in eastern Massachusetts in the decade after the war. Between 1957 and 1960, Route 24 pushed through the western part of town, and Avon found itself astride the major north-south highway which connected Boston with the southeastern part of the state. While always a short ride from Brockton, Avon now found itself within easy commuting distance of Taunton, Fall River, and Interstate 95.

Additionally, Route 24 provided easy access to Route 128, known in those days as "The Golden Semi-Circle" because of the rapid industrialization taking place along its corridor. Both of these highways brought new sources of employment for townspeople in the Metropolitan Boston area, and they also served to end Avon's days as a small, isolated village. Now, thirty years later, Route 24 brings more than 50,000 automobiles a day through Avon. (Note 1)

What this expanded highway system meant to the town can be seen in an examination of its population figures. They show that from 1950 to

1970 the number of inhabitants increased by 98.6%, from, 2,666 residents to 5,295. It was during the 1950's and early '60's that Avon became one of the several "bedroom communities" which surround Boston, and this changed the composite character of the population. The town lost factory operatives, household workers and laborers, while it gained professionals, skilled blue collar workers and employees engaged in the public service sector. (Note 2)

These new residents needed homes, and from about 1954 to 1961 the village saw a remarkable increase in the construction of single family houses. The Avon Planning Board, organized in 1953, had the responsibility of making sure that growth came in a reasonable, carefully considered manner, but it is doubtful that even its members could have been prepared for the onslaught which followed.

In 1954, for example, the Planning Board approved six subdivisions totaling 149 single family houses. The largest developments were Brentwood-at-Avon, with forty-five units; Highland Park, site of the famous trolley park, with twenty-seven units; and Nichols Avenue, with twenty-one. In addition to the big developments, the town had to contend annually with requests for building permits for single house lots.

In 1955 the Planning Board recommended, and the voters approved, a plan increasing the required lot sizes in residential districts from 7,500 square feet, with a minimum of seventy-five feet frontage, to 15,000 square feet, with a minimum of 120 feet of frontage. Exempted were previously accepted subdivisions as well as any single lots already accepted. The Planning Board ended that year having approved a total of 145 house lots in several subdivisions, but the peak of this type of development had been reached.

In 1956 no subdivisions were approved by the town. The following year the Planning Board granted 114 building permits, but that number

fell to thirty-one in 1958 and to twenty-six in 1959. In 1961 two subdivisions were approved, which totaled only twenty-six units. The days of large scale residential development in Avon were over.

Two key issues served to halt further rapid growth. The first was the limited supply of water, "Many permits were given for new homes and many more would have been issued if not for the shortage of water," reported the Selectmen in 1959. This was, they said, "a source of great concern in reference to the advancement of the town."

Likewise, the Planning Board pointed out that because of the lack of water no subdivisions had been approved in 1959. However, said the board, twenty-six homes were built in that year, and "as soon as water is found in the town we will experience another building boom". (Note 3)

The water problem was eased somewhat in 1963 when another well and pumping station was built on Memorial Drive, and during that summer alone an additional 19,000,000 gallons of water were supplied. In the same year a new 1,000,000 gallon standpipe was completed on Central Street. (Note 4) Nevertheless, the shortage of available water has never been completely solved, and it promises to remain a critical problem - not only for Avon, but for most of the cities and towns around it - well into the twenty-first century.

Another deterrent to further large scale residential development has been the lack of buildable land. Comprising only 4.35 square miles, Avon ranks as one of the state's smallest communities, and much of its remaining land is unsuitable for development. In 1973, for example, slightly more than 50% of the town's 2,790 acres were still vacant. A good deal of this land, particularly east of Page Street, is within the flood plain and classified as wetlands. (Note 5) Additionally, the fact that in the late sixties and early seventies large parcels of buildable land

were designated for industrial use has meant that residential development in the town has been kept to a minimum.

In 1959 the Planning Board reported that one Boston consulting firm was projecting that Avon's population would reach 7,500 by 1970, an increase of 85%. (Note 6) That prediction never came true. By 1963 the housing boom was over, and since 1970 the population has actually decreased by about 620 persons, standing in December 1988 at 4,673. From 1964 through the mid-1970's Avon approved building permits for an average of only twenty residential units per year. Since 1980, with neighboring communities such as Brockton and Stoughton absorbing the demand for apartments and condominiums, Avon has approved a total of only fifty residential housing permits. (Note 7)

Just as residential building in the town was slackening, industrial construction was increasing. In March 1956 voters at the Annual Town Meeting approved the creation of the Avon Industrial and Development Commission. Its first chairman was Lowell L. Gray, and one of the group's earliest objectives was to find an industrial client willing to develop the twenty-seven acre former site of the Swedish Lutheran Home on North Main Street. Although ultimately unsuccessful in this endeavor, the Commission remained steadfast in its commitment to make full use of Avon's advantageous location along Route 24.

Although the town met with some success in attracting firms in the late fifties and early sixties, the modern industrial history of Avon began in 1966. In that year Orville C. Stockwell decided to sell his 109-acre pig farm west of Page Street. This proposition to sell came to the attention of Leo Issa, who had recently developed an apartment complex on Leo's Lane, off South Street. Mr. Issa believed that the area surrounding the Stockwell farm would make a good industrial park, but he realized that more than just

the 109-acre tract would be needed.

Mr. Issa approached John J. DeMarco, then chairman of the Planning Board, and as his intention of developing the land became known around town, other large landowners in the vicinity came to him offering their property for sale. They felt that the lack of an access road through the area would always hinder development of the land, and that therefore the property had little value to them as individuals.

The Avon Industrial Park, begun in 1966, faced formidable challenges in its early days. Much of the toughest competition came from Brockton, which was developing the West Side Industrial Park, once the site of sewer beds. A municipally-owned complex, located in a city which could offer amenities such as water and sewer, the West Side facility on paper appeared to be no match for a similar park located in a town with a chronic water shortage and no sewer system.

Not only did the Avon Industrial Park survive, however, it flourished to the point where it has recently been called the most successful complex of its kind in the Brockton area. Four significant factors contributed to this success. First, of course, was the park's proximity to the Boston area. Second was the availability of prime industrial land, at fair prices, adjacent to Route 24. Third was the low cost of construction at that time, and fourth was the receptivity of the townspeople to industrial development. (Note 8)

Although the town of Avon, unlike Brockton, had not initiated the industrial park, it responded to its development with full co-operation. Aggressive marketing made potential developers more aware of the complex, and when the voters accepted Bodwell Street, (named for former selectman Franklin Bodwell) as a public way in 1967, this virtually assured the park's viability. Here was the long-awaited access road which facilitated subdivision and development.

The first tenant of the Avon Industrial Park was a Brockton firm, Victory Shoe Company. By 1984 there were ninety-two firms located within the 350-acre parcel, and 1985 saw the beginning of development at the Avon Industrial Park West, on the westerly side of Route 24.

In addition to creating more than 3,000 jobs, the park has contributed significantly to the town's tax base. In 1962, for example, 11% of Avon's tax revenue came from business and industry. By 1973 that figure had increased to 25%, and in December 1988 it stood at 63%. If and when the Industrial Park West is fully developed, this could add another 15% to the tax base. In 1984 Avon received a \$700,000 Community Action Development Grant from the state which enabled the town to run a second water main under Route 24 to the standpipe on Central Street. This project not only completed a water loop, it also revived an area which had previously been lying fallow because of lack of water. This parcel is today the Industrial Park West, and by the end of 1988 it was generating more than \$400,000 in tax revenue. (Note 9)

This transformation of Avon has presented a new set of problems, entirely different from those faced by earlier residents. Over the past twenty years certain environmental issues have arisen which have forced the townspeople to confront the question of what the quality of life in Avon will be like for their children and grandchildren. Concern about overcrowding, traffic, noise, air and water pollution has caused both the friends and opponents of industrialization to realize that there must be carefully formulated guidelines placed upon growth and expansion.

An important step toward this realization was taken in March 1972, when the town voted to accept the new Zoning By-Law which had been drawn up by the Avon Planning Board. As Chairman DeMarco explained in his introduction, the By-Law was written ". . . in the belief

that the welfare of our community may be seriously injured when incompatible uses of land are allowed to exist close to each other. . . . Although a zoning by-law is often regarded as an inhibiting agent, it should be more properly visualized as a means for encouraging the sound growth of the community in an orderly manner . . ." (Note 10)

This new by-law, which superceded another written in 1955. remains in effect almost two decades later. It contains an entire section detailing environmental performance standards, and most residents agree that it has served the town well. Like the scarcity of water, however, the issue of continued industrial development will remain a challenge for succeeding generations.

Because of the rapid residential and industrial development, the Avon school system has faced a uniquely different set of challenges, and these too promise no easy solutions. On June 30, 1948 the Tri-Town Superintendency No. 35, which administered the public schools of Avon, Randolph and Holbrook for forty-seven years was dissolved. A new union was formed between Avon and Holbrook, and H. Carroll Gilgan was named Superintendent. An Avon native and a graduate of M.I.T., this veteran educator kept his office upstairs in the Avon Town Hall.

On April II, 1952 an early morning fire swept through the Gifford School. Fortunately the blaze occurred during spring vacation when the building was closed, but this was the end of the old school's service to the town.

Superintendent Gilgan and his staff worked tirelessly to effect the transfer of supplies and students to other locations, and this process began even before the embers had cooled. Mrs. Helen Kuehn, secretary to Mr. Gilgan, remembers that the superintendent, assisted by Charles Francis, the athletic director, entered the still-smoldering building several times in order to salvage what he could from the

Gifford. These trips were repeated countless times in the days which followed. (Note 11)

Thanks to the superintendent's diligence and the generosity of local institutions, Avon children went back to school on schedule after vacation. The high school students were assigned to the Lutheran School, while children in Grades 7 and 8 were divided between St. Michael's Parish Hall and the Public Library. Finally, double sessions had to be instituted at the Littlefield School to accommodate the elementary students until a reassignment sent some to the vestry of the Baptist Church. (Note 12)

On April 8, 1954, exactly two years after the loss of the Gifford School, the town voted to raise \$950,000 to build and equip a consolidated school for all Avon children. The largest part of the expense would be met with insurance money realized from the Gifford, and it was decided that the new building would stand on the same West Main Street site. The elementary wing of the new Consolidated School opened on October 3, 1955, and five months later the building was completed.

On December 31, 1955 the Avon-Holbrook School Union No. 38 was ended after only seven years. Increasing enrollment in both towns made the dissolution necessary because each town by 1955 had recognized separate and distinct problems, and both were best served by handling their challenges individually.

The Avon schools lost a good friend upon the dissolution because Mr. Gilgan announced his intention of becoming the superintendent of the Holbrook school system. Employed in Avon since 1929, "Pop" Gilgan still holds a special place in the hearts of many older residents. He is remembered as an even-tempered gentleman who, like the best of teachers, taught through his own example. The 1955 Town Report was dedicated to him. an honor bestowed only upon a very few. "His

straight thinking," the dedicatory passage reads, "his high standard of justice, his ability to know when to argue a point in his calm, dignified manner are qualities of which we all admire." (Note 13)

The new superintendent of schools, Wendell Thornton, presided over an educational system which saw its enrollment more than double within a decade. In 1955 there were 644 pupils attending the town's public schools. By October 1957, as that figure approached 800, the Littlefield School, scheduled for retirement, was pressed into service to handle the overflow from the Consolidated School's first grade.

As the town's population grew, overcrowding in the elementary grades was so acute that a state of emergency was declared. It was determined that at least eighteen additional elementary classrooms were needed. A School Building Needs Investigating Committee was hurriedly appointed.

On October 24, 1960, as the public school enrollment passed the 900 mark, the town voted to build a fourteen-room elementary school on the site of the old Glover Estate, which had been purchased earlier in the year for \$15,000. This new school, built at a cost of \$662,000, opened in September 1962 as the Robert F. Crowley Elementary School.

Five months earlier, on April 30, the town had voted to spend an additional \$685,000 for another fourteen-room school to be built on South Street. This facility, later called the Butler School, opened on October 3, 1963, at a time when the town's enrollment was approaching 1,200 students.

The number of children attending Avon public schools continued to increase until 1968, when enrollment peaked at 1,450. Throughout the period double sessions were necessary in the Junior-Senior High

School, and Principal John F. Shanahan stated that this was causing some Avon parents to place their children in private, parochial or vocational schools. Nevertheless, the double sessions continued until 1973. (Note 14)

Beginning in 1969 enrollment decreased sharply. By 1976 the student population in public schools was down to 1,224, and in 1979 the number dropped below 1,000 for the first time since 1961. The main reason for this reduced enrollment was a decline in the birthrate, but school officials were also troubled by the fact that increasing numbers of eighth graders were choosing not to go to Avon High School. In 1988 it was reported that over the previous decade 20-40% of Avon's ninth graders had enrolled in Blue Hills Regional Technical School, while non-public enrollment had hovered around the 20% mark. In other words, over that decade about 60% of Avon's children had elected not to attend the town's public high school. (Note 15)

In 1983 public school enrollment was down to 760 students. The administrative structure was changed, as the town again combined the superintendency with the high school principalship. In 1986 the Avon School Committee hired Dr. Joseph Rappa, then working in Ellsworth, Maine, to lead the system through this period of crisis.

Like other difficult issues of change versus the quality of life, the educational future of Avon will challenge succeeding generations. In December 1987, in the face of declining enrollment, the school committee unanimously recommended the formation of a Regional School District Planning Committee, and a similar movement was begun in Holbrook. Within a year Avon voters, perhaps fearing the loss of educational autonomy, had twice rejected the school committee's recommendation." (Note 16)

One of the most noticeable changes to come to Avon in the period

since World War II has been the addition of modern public facilities. In February 1949, for example, a new public library was opened on West Main Street. This library was a bequest to the town from Henry Lawton Blanchard, who had died four years earlier. The small library served the town well for twenty-one years until 1970, when Boston architect Maurice H. Fingold designed a \$160,000 addition. This too was paid for with money from Mr. Blanchard's endowment. The addition, which added 408 square feet to the Library, has made the facility one of the most attractive in the area. (Note 17)

In 1972 the town proceeded with the construction of housing for its elderly citizens. Thanks to the hard work of several townspeople, including Roger Tracy and Rev. A. Paul Gallivan, state funds were secured for the project, and today the complex at Fellowship Circle off East High Street is the fruit of their labor.

Dramatic change has also come to the Goeres Square area. In 1955 the Avon Co-operative Bank constructed a new building on the former site of Enterprise Hall. Incorporated in 1914, the bank had begun its days in a small office upstairs in the Engine House. Four years after the bank's present-day headquarters were built, the new Avon Post Office was constructed across from it, on East Main Street.

At the other end of the square, both of Avon's churches saw changes during the 1960's. In 1963 it was determined that St. Michael's was no longer large enough to accommodate the growing Catholic population. Under the direction of its pastor, Rev. James T. Smith, the parish constructed a new church and rectory, both of which were dedicated in 1964. The new buildings stand on the former site of the Hiram Blanchard Estate on North Main Street, bought by St. Michael's in 1908. The old church was renovated in 1986 and has reopened as an office complex called One Goeres Square.

The Avon Baptist Church also underwent renovation in this period. Edward M. Bridge of Wakefield, an architect who had worked on the church's sanctuary in 1948, was called again in 1963 to design an addition to the building. In late 1964 the first building fund drive took place, and work began in 1966. The exterior of the building was completed the following year, under the watchful eye of Rev. James O. Eskridge. Not only was Pastor Eskridge a talented organizer, it has also been written that he was one of the best - if not the best - preachers in the church's history.' (Note 18) Thanks to Rev. Eskridge, the Avon Baptist Church began a successful nursery school program, which by 1988 was flourishing with seventy-seven students.

Both churches owe a debt of gratitude to Anthony Marino, a local businessman and philanthropist. Mr. Marino, who died in 1972, purchased a large parcel of land located between the two churches, and without fanfare donated it to the two institutions.

Beginning in the mid-1960's the entire east side of the Goeres Square area underwent great change. It had been evident for some time that the old Engine House was no longer adequate as either a fire or police station. In 1966 Fire Chief William T. Wheeler reminded the town that it had an investment in fire apparatus and equipment that would approximate \$150,000 to replace. "I am stressing this fact," reported the chief, "due to the deplorable condition of the Fire and Police station, being inadequate for the storage of supplies, records, [and because there is] no housing for two pieces of apparatus and the emergency lighting unit." The fire department that year had responded to 190 calls, a far cry from the days of Chief Butler.

Police Chief Carl F. Miller was also critical of the ancient building. His department had made 254 arrests in 1966 and, he reported, "Our present facilities are definitely inadequate for the proper performance of Police duties.(Note 19)

On March 8, 1967 the town voted to appropriate \$125,000 to build and equip a new combination fire and police station. Of this sum, \$5,000 was to be raised through taxes, and the remaining \$120,000 would come through a bond issue. The new building was to be of colonial design and when completed would provide 6,206 square feet of space for fire and police apparatus. (Note 20)

A great deal of Avon history came down when the land was cleared for the new building. The old Engine House, a fixture in the square since well before the Civil War, and the scene of many a political battle, was demolished. So was the old grocery store of O.B. Crane, built in 1866 and a familiar landmark to generations of villagers. Sold to Dr. Elliot in 1929, the old building succumbed to the wrecking ball after standing for 100 years in the square. Gone too was Graham's Garage. Once, as Forrest Hall, this old structure had sheltered the church services first of the Baptists and later the Catholics of the village.

The new fire and police station was dedicated on June 1, 1969. Seven months later Fire Chief Wheeler died suddenly at the age of forty-nine, and today the station stands in his memory.

In March 1974 the town voted to sell its Town Hall to the Blanchard Trust for \$50,100. This historic building, constructed by William Blanchard in 1784 and donated to the town in 1938, was not large enough to house an expanding local government. The voters decided against constructing a new building and instead acquired the bankrupt Avon Plaza, on East Main Street. A modern building, this was quickly converted into town offices. The new facility was dedicated on November 23, 1975 to the memory of Cornelius D. Buckley, a twenty-three year veteran of the Board of Selectmen who had died the previous May.

The old town hall reverted to the care of the Blanchard trustees in

1975. After a period of study which included consultations with Colonial Williamsburg, Old Sturbridge Village, the Newport Preservation Society and similar organizations, the trustees, led by Dr. Richard Weiss, felt confident enough to begin restoration of the tavern in 1978. Scrupulous attention to detail returned the building to its eighteenth century appearance, and in December 1979 it was opened to the public.

Not far from the tavern is another example of spectacular restoration. This is the Henry Lawton Blanchard Museum, located in Goeres Square. Built by Captain Samuel Bobbins, a master mariner sailing out of Boston, it has stood in the square since 1820. Captain Bobbins, who perished at sea in 1847, left his wife Sally to raise two sons in the house after his death. She became a familiar figure among the old-time villagers, and her son George became one of Avon's first selectman in 1888.

Sally Robbins sold the house to the Butler family in 1882, and it remained in their hands until it was acquired by the Blanchard Trust in 1966. After extensive renovation it opened as a museum in 1970, and today it also houses the collection of the Avon Historical Society.

Located between the Blanchard House Museum and the fire station is Moses Curtis Park, dedicated in 1976 to the town's first settler. In the park is a classic gazebo, or open bandstand. This beautiful structure was the idea of Selectman Tom Meninno, who brought his plan before his colleagues on the Board. With their approval, he supervised the project through to its completion. The gazebo was built in 1975 by Jim Sullivan and his sons Mike, Pat and Paul.

The gazebo, like the restored tavern and museum house, symbolizes the resilience and optimism of the townspeople. It illustrates the fact

that even in the midst of profound change the beauty and grace of Avon's past is very much alive.

NOTES

1. Interview with John J. DeMarco, chairman of the Avon Board of Selectmen, November 23, 1988: hereinafter cited as DeMarco interview. See also Old Colony Planning Council, The Avon Plan. Part II: Summary, 1974, p. 13; hereinafter cited as Avon Plan, Part II. In 1972 the Council estimated that 49,100 automobiles per day crossed the Avon-Stoughton line on Route 24.
2. Town of Avon, Planning Board, Master Plan Report: Avon, Massachusetts, 1964, p. 64; hereinafter cited as Avon Master Plan, 1964. See also Old Colony Planning Council, The Avon Plan. Part 1: Technical, 1974, p. 33: hereinafter cited as Avon Plan, Part 1.
3. Avon Town Report. 1959. pp. 38: 51.
4. Avon Town Report, 1963. p. 74.
5. Avon Plan, Part II, pp. 4-6.
6. Avon Town Report, 1959, p. 51.
7. New England School Development Council, Analysis of Education and Financial Issues Related to the Establishment of a Regional School District for Avon and Holbrook, Massachusetts [1988]. p. 4: hereinafter cited as NESDEC Report.
8. Avon Master Plan, 1964, pp. 51-52. A good overview of the Avon Industrial Park is found in Steve Yarmalovicz, "Avon makes the big time," The Sunday Enterprise [Brockton, Mass.], July 1. 1984. pp. E1: E5: hereinafter cited as Yarmalovicz.

9. Yarmalovicz, p. E5: DeMareo interview.
10. Town of Avon, Planning Board, Town of Avon, Massachusetts; Zoning By-Law and Map 11972), n.p.
- 11.. Interview with Mrs. Helen Kuehn, December 1, 1988. See also "\$250,000 Fire Damages Gifford School in Avon," Brockton Enterprise. April 11, 1952, pp. 1; 6.
12. Avon Town Report. 1952. p. 93.
13. Avon Town Report, 1955, n.p. Mr. Gilgan died in 1961 at the age of 60. He is buried in St. Michael's Cemetery.
14. Enrollment figures, as well as information concerning school construction, is found in the town reports for the respective years. Mr. Shanahan 's remarks are found in the 1971 town report.
15. NESDEC Report, p. 9.
16. Avon Town Report. 1987. p. 144.
17. Information on the Library addition is found in Avon Town Report, 1970, p. 106.
18. Avon Baptist Church History. 1980. n.p.
19. Avon Town Report. 1966. pp. 84; 72-73.
20. Avon Town Report. 1967. p. 23.