



Celebrate March 7 at OPRF Museum Gala 2024 “Heart of Our Villages” Awards go to Sue & Nick Bridge, John Rigas

By Mary Ann Porucznik, 2024 Gala Committee

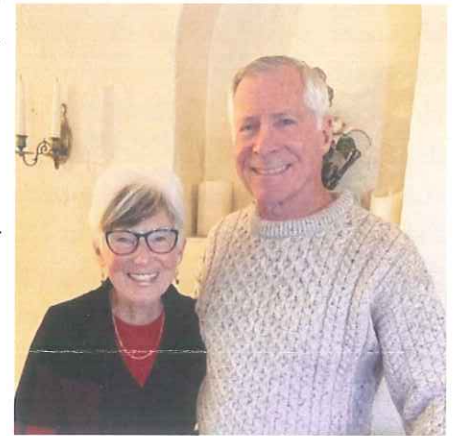
The fifth OPRF Museum Gala on March 7 promises to be a fun time—as well as an occasion to recognize the contributions of three outstanding villagers. As we celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Oak Park River Forest High School, it is only fitting that all of this year’s “Heart of Our Villages” awards will be presented to individuals who have significant links to the high school as well as significant volunteer accomplishments in our communities. Among their multiple roles, one served on the District 200 Board, another as superintendent/principal of OPRF



John Rigas

High School, and the third as a volunteer instructor at the high school and supporter of arts education.

The 2024 “Heart of Our Villages” honorees are John Rigas (River Forest) and Susan and Nicholas Bridge (Oak Park). The award acknowledges their lives of service and activism. Their efforts have made our communities better places to live, as they generously shared their time and talents over the years. In case you haven’t met them before, here’s a snapshot of their contributions to our communities.



Susan and Nicholas Bridge

John Rigas, an Oak Park native, graduate of Oak Park River Forest High School, and long-time resident of River Forest, has a background in technology and a history of public service. He served as a River Forest Village Trustee from 1989 to 1997, as a board member of OPRF High School from 2001 to 2009, and as President of the Village of River Forest from 2009 to 2013. He also served for 30 years as a member of the River Forest Service Club and was twice named River Forest “Villager of the Year” by *Wednesday Journal*.

(Continued on page 2)

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While serving on the River Forest Board of Trustees and as President of River Forest, Rigas supported intergovernmental cooperation and took steps to improve economic development, such as the construction of a new village hall and the River Forest Town Center at the corner of Lake and Harlem. As a member of the OPRF High School Board, he is credited with casting the tie-breaking vote to install lights in the stadium after its renovation.

An accomplished entrepreneur, Rigas co-founded and is co-owner of Microsystems, a computer software and service company. His focus is to identify technology solutions and take advantage of business opportunities as they present themselves. Currently a member of the Board of Directors for Forest Park National Bank (an OPRF Museum Gala sponsor), Rigas also has served on the boards of the Illinois State University Foundation, the Oak Park Country Club Scholarship Foundation, the OPRF High School Alumni Association, and the Oak Park Windmills, a fast-pitch girls' softball organization. The Rigas family was also one of the Founding Families of OPRF Museum, and have remained strong supporters because they know that "History Matters."

While many will remember Sue Bridge as the last person to hold the joint position of superintendent/principal of OPRF High School from 1999 to 2007, her commitment to our communities goes far beyond the high school. She has spent more than 50 years in education as a teacher and administrator, for many years in the Glenbard High School system, and most recently as associate professor at Concordia University in River Forest. Her volunteer positions include service on the boards of the Lubeznik Center for the Arts in Michigan City, Ind.; the Symphony of Oak Park and River Forest; and the League of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association. An accomplished flutist herself, she works to ensure that future generations will be able to play and enjoy music through her involvement in the CSO's Adventures in Music program for children and her service as co-chair of the mentorship program and on the board of PING (Providing Instruments for the Next Generation)!

Named Oak Park's "Villager of the Year" by *Wednesday Journal* in 2000, Sue Bridge has also been recognized as Educator of the Year (2007) by the Oak Park Education Foundation and has received the Concordia University Award for Community Leadership. She is also active in the OPRF Community Foundation's Women Leadership in Philanthropy program.

A teacher, writer/editor, environmentalist, publicist and spokesman, Nick Bridge is well known in the local arts community. He combines his interests—and they are many and varied—in unique ways that support education and community. He served as a volunteer mural teacher at Oak Park River Forest High School and has a studio on Harrison Street. His mini-murals focus on the natural history of Oak Park and can be seen on South Boulevard. He is currently serving as a member of the Oak Park Climate Action Network and the village's Plan Commission.

As chair of the Oak Park Public Arts Commission, he oversaw the first outdoor commissioned mural in the village. He has served on the Environment and Energy Commission, the PlanIt Green Steering Committee, and Park District of Oak Park committees. He has mentored youth and coached youth soccer, and like Sue, has served on the board of directors and as president of the Lubeznik Center for the Arts in Michigan City, Ind.

Show Your Support!

We are excited to recognize those who have given so much to our villages as educators and public servants and we invite all to attend this event. The fifth OPRF Museum Gala will take place at 6:30 p.m. on Thursday, March 7th at the Nineteenth Century Club at 178 Forest Avenue in Oak Park. Tickets are \$125 per person and can be purchased at oprfmuseum.org or at OPRF Museum. In addition, friends, family and supporters of the award winners can purchase congratulatory ads in the Gala program book. For more information, including ad sizing and pricing, visit our website or call 708-848-6755. The deadline for ads is February 22nd; gala ticket sales close on February 29th.



Snowbirds Flock to Oak Park in 1925

Florida Real Estate Boom Brings "Oak Park" to Sunshine State

by Cheri Benstrup, OPRF Museum Community Outreach Coordinator

After Dr. C. Pruyn Stringfield of Chicago visited Sarasota, Fla., he soon decided he would leave his successful medical practice and go into real estate. News of the subdivision Stringfield was developing was heralded in an *Oak Leaves* article on Feb. 7, 1925,

when Oak Park resident Eugene H. Largent of 734 Wisconsin returned from the South with the news.

"I am enclosing a clipping taken from the local paper here and I could not help thinking of how we people from Oak Park still have the deep feeling for the old home town and you can see they are now opening a new subdivision here



Dr. C. Pruyn Stringfield, pictured in the Sarasota Herald, November 7, 1926

under the name of Oak Park, and the streets and courts are all named just as our streets are there," Largent wrote to *Oak Leaves*.

At the time, Sarasota was the fastest growing city in the county, with its population increasing from 3,500 the previous June to 12,000 as reported when the article was written in February 1925. It would soon be the largest city on the Gulf Coast south of St. Petersburg, in the heart of one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. *Oak Leaves* reported that many Chicagoans had been relocating to Sarasota and the subdivision will be a "gentle reminder of the Windy City."

"The genial doctor's decision wasn't reached hastily, but after he had visited other parts of Florida, and as he states, 'he could not see anything but Sarasota,' and today he is one of the greatest boosters that the city claims," *Oak Leaves* stated.

"Instead of writing out prescriptions for pills and other drugs which cure and alleviate the sufferings of mankind, he is now writing his friends in Chicago and other parts of the country that Sarasota is one 'golden opportunity' which they cannot afford to let slip."

Stringfield must have been quite confident of his new investment as he left Chicago where he was quite the socialite. As early as 1885-86 he was listed in "The Elite Directory and Club List of Chicago" for

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HOUSES already being built

If you will start building within 60 days we will make startling reductions in price of lot and help you build,, \$750.00 cash and less than \$50.00 per month will build you a 5-room modern home complete.

This is your opportunity to own your own home and pay rent to yourself.

Come in and talk it over

DR. C. PRUYN STRINGFIELD

Realtor—Owner

23 Lords Arcade Sarasota, Fla.

An advertisement for Stringfield's Oak Park subdivision from the Sarasota Herald newspaper, October 3, 1926

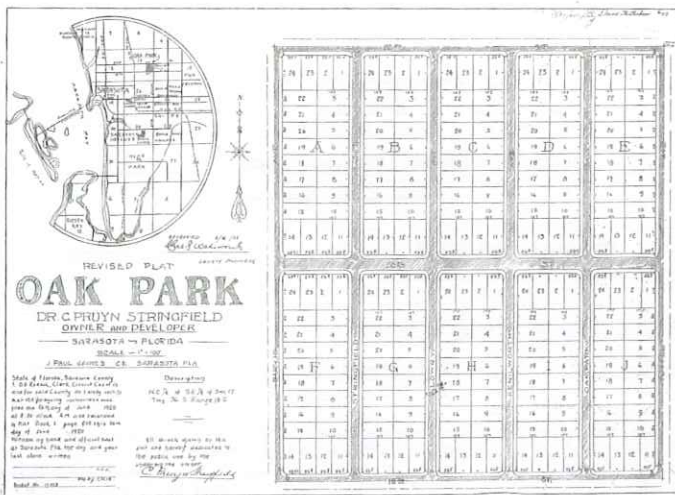
"prominent residents on the most fashionable streets of the city and principal suburbs." Also in the publication were prominent Oak Park leaders with familiar names like Scoville, Hemingway, and Herrick.

A graduate of Chicago Medical College (the medical department at Northwestern University),

(Continued on page 4)

Stringfield was considered a leading physician and surgeon in Chicago and eventually specialized in kidney disease. His address was listed as 2448 Calumet Ave., on Chicago's South Side. By 1917 he had moved to the suburbs and was living on the North Shore in Lake Bluff.

Though *Oak Leaves* stated that Stringfield's subdivision would be a "replica of Oak Park" it seems to have fallen far short. Development in Florida began to collapse in 1926 as rampant speculation led to bank failures and put the state on the slippery path to the 1929 start of the Great Depression earlier than



A 1924 plat of the proposed Oak Park subdivision in Sarasota

most of the country. The bust came quickly. In late 1925, Sarasota's revised City Charter was signed by the Florida governor, extending its city limits from 2 square miles to 69 square miles and celebrated with a huge party; a year later, Sarasota shrunk to 17 square miles in a bid to save money. The bust would continue into the 1940s.

A current Sarasota map shows the area of the original subdivision with three north-south streets, extending five blocks from north to south and about three blocks east to west. At the time it was developed, the subdivision was just two blocks beyond the city limits. The subdivision does have two streets like those in the village - Oak Park Avenue and Euclid Avenue, and in between is Stringfield Avenue. We could not find any other Oak Park-related street names on the map of Sarasota today.

The 1924 plat shows that Stringfield offered 212 lots in the Oak Park subdivision. The plat changed in 1925 and showed a Kenilworth Avenue which was never built. According to the Sarasota County History Center, it was common for the plat to differ from how the subdivision was ultimately built.

The most prominent newspaper of the time, the *Sarasota Herald Tribune*, often mentioned the new Oak Park subdivision and lots. In 1926, many of the advertisements started boasting of the paved streets in the neighborhood; that same year Stringfield's unsuccessful run for city council was newspaper fodder, and also mentioned his friendship with the Ringling brothers of circus fame. According to the Sarasota County History Center, the Ringlings were Sarasota royalty at the time—and also real estate subdividers and speculators!

Stringfield died March 6, 1928, in a tragic and peculiar accident, falling to his death from the roof of the First Bank and Trust Co. building (where his office was located) the same afternoon he made his will.



Headline from the Sarasota Herald, March 7, 1926

According to neighborhoods.com, the Oak Park subdivision in Sarasota "features cozy homes that are competitively priced. This is a well-established community that continues to attract interest from buyers looking in the Sarasota area." The median selling prices of "Oak Park" homes is \$314,500.

If you are going to be a Snowbird in Sarasota in 2024 or 2025, be sure to catch a spring training game at the former spring home of the Chicago White Sox before they moved to Arizona. Now the spring home of the Baltimore Orioles, Ed Smith Stadium is at the corner of *Euclid Avenue* and 12th Street—just south of Stringfield Avenue and Oak Park Avenue.

(All illustrations for this article are courtesy of the Sarasota County History Center, 337 N. Tamiami Trail, Osprey, FL 34229)

No Stranger to the Cold

By Frank R. Fiorito, OPRF Museum Board Member

Abraham Stroller Tobinon was no stranger to the cold. Throughout his childhood, he had known cold winters. He also knew the cold of Russian prisons.

Braving the January cold of 1913, those attending the social service class at Oak Park's Unity Temple listened attentively to this impassioned speaker. The Russian immigrant had a story to tell, a warning for the audience.

When people are pushed by oppression and abuse to the brink of endurance, violence is the outcome. He knew this from experience. His warning to the audience: America was on a similar path.

Knowing his Russian name, Alexander Krasnoshchyokov, would be too hard for Americans to pronounce, Alexander took his mother's name and as a naturalized citizen was now known as Abraham Stroller Tobinon, "A.S. Tobinon" in short.

After escaping Russia, he arrived in New York in 1903 where he supported himself as a house painter and decorator. By 1910, he had moved to Chicago to study law, married Gertrude Klein, and soon welcomed newborn daughter Llewella Judith.

Highly intelligent and with boundless energy, Tobinon determined which of his many talents to use in this rapidly developing suburban area. He moved his family to River Forest in 1912 and began regular advertising in the *Oak Leaves* as a painter and decorator. His ads promised "Good Work; Reasonably Done." The size of his ads grew with the success of his business. Soon he had a thriving paint store at 6440 Harrison Street in Oak Park.

While his painting business provided increasing income, Tobinon continued his law studies. By the end of that first year in River Forest he had passed the bar exam. Painting may have been more lucrative than the practice of law, but he used his law talents in pursuit of social justice.

In 1913, working with Otto McFeely, News Editor for the *Oak Leaves* and social reformer Henry Neil, Tobinon established the Oak Park Forum, a non-partisan group formed to debate citizen concerns. The Forum hosted meetings for debating economic and social reforms. One well-attended debate focused on establishing a minimum working wage for women. The minimum wage was intended to help keep women from turning to prostitution to support themselves.

Now living in Oak Park in 1914, Tobinon ran as a candidate for Oak Park's Justice of the Peace. He lost that campaign, but it foreshadowed political battles that lay in his future.

By 1915, he had sold his paint business and accepted the position of president of the newly formed Douglas College in Chicago's Douglas Park neighborhood, a school dedicated to helping the area's foreign-born and needy population.

Oak Park watched to see what this charismatic man would do next.

On November 7, 1917, eight months after Czar Nicholas II abdicated his throne, the new Russian government was overthrown

by the Bolsheviks led by I. S. Lenin. The new Russian government needed to establish its legitimacy and gain recognition by other nations. Competent leadership was needed. Leon Trotsky, a Bolshevik and

(Continued on page 6)



A. S. TOBINSON
Candidate for Justice of the Peace

This photo appeared in Oak Leaves on April 4, 1914 during Tobinon's unsuccessful campaign for Justice of the Peace

Tobinson (continued from page 5)

a close associate of Lenin reached out to Tobinson, inviting him to return to his homeland to be part of the "new" Russia.

Tobinson answered the call. Alexander Krasnoshchyokov would once more walk the streets of his homeland and leave A.S. Tobinson of Oak Park and River Forest in his past.

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Print advertisement from Oak Leaves, May 11, 1912

The country soon fell into civil war as the "Czarists," supportive of the monarchy, battled the "Reds." With his wife and two small children, Tobinson sailed across the Pacific to Vlasdivostok and was immediately thrust into the conflict. Within the span of weeks, he took on increasingly responsible roles, ultimately to be named Governor of Siberia.

Siberia is vast and extends from the Pacific Ocean to the Ural Mountains. Its area is one third larger than the United States, more than 5 million square miles. As World War I continued to rage, Russia needed Siberia's resources and men to fight Germany.


The new Russian government was teetering on the edge of failure and it wasn't at all certain that the Bolsheviks would succeed in ruling this vast country. To support the "Czarists," Japan invaded the easternmost part of Siberia. Tobinson and his government, located 4,000 miles away from Moscow, was their target. Within a year, the Japanese had prevailed in controlling the area and it was thought that Tobinson had been captured and executed. The *Oak Leaves* mourned the loss, but there was great pride that this adopted son had risen to become the "George Washington of Siberia."

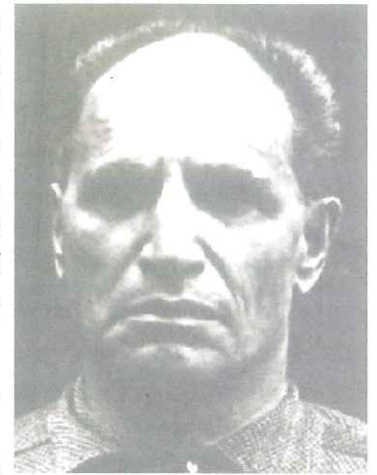
Abraham S. Tobinson was no more, or so most believed. There were random sightings and rumors that he had survived. It was only when his wife returned to Oak Park that she was able to confirm

that he had somehow escaped death and had successfully led guerrilla forces to defeat the Czarists. Furthermore, he was now the president of the newly formed Far Eastern Republic.

According to plan, the Far Eastern Republic was absorbed by the Russian Federation and Tobinson would move

on to other adventures. He would weather purges and imprisonments over the next 17 years.

In July 1937, Alexander Krasnoshchyokov (a.k.a. A. S. Tobinson) was arrested by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs, Josef Stalin's secret police force--also known as the NKVD--during one of Stalin's infamous purges and convicted of espionage against Russia. Tobinson was no stranger to the cold and on a cold November day he was executed. 



Official photo of Tobinson taken by the NKVD shortly after his arrest for espionage in July 1937.

History Matters

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We welcome your suggestions and comments.
Please email us at: oprhistorymatters@sbcglobal.net

A Gentle Force

Mary Ann Porucznik Receives Special Community Award

The Nineteenth Century Charitable Association (NCCA) has chosen Mary Ann Porucznik as its Gentle Force Award winner for 2024. The award recognizes members of the NCCA who have demonstrated exceptional service to the club.



Mary Ann Porucznik

Mary Ann, who is also a dedicated volunteer and former board member of OPRF Museum, is decidedly deserving. A member of NCCA since 1985, she has supported a wide range of activities on behalf of the organization. Her preciseness, expertise, and productivity have shone through every time.

Mary Ann will be honored at the NCCA's Annual Gala on Saturday, April 6. Join the party to celebrate Mary Ann on this special evening. Tickets can be purchased through Becky Grajeda, NCCA office administrator, by calling 708-386-2729.

Save the Dates for These Exciting Coming Events!

Last Thursday of Each Month, 7 pm History Book Club

Enjoy reading and history? Join our monthly History Book Club on the last Thursday of each month. The Book Club is open to current members of The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest, but space is limited. The February selection is *Mirage Factory* by Gary Krist and March's book will be *The Man with the Golden Arm* by Nelson Algren. To reserve your place or check your membership status, email us at oprfhistorymatters@sbcglobal.net or call 708-848-6755.

Sunday, May 5, 1 to 5 pm

"Tales Our Houses Tell" House Walk Returns to River Forest

Our 20th Spring House Walk will feature interior tours of five homes in the southwest corner of River Forest this year. Watch our website and social media for more details as they become available.

Saturday, June 1, 2 to 4 pm

Free Vintage Baseball Game

See baseball as it used to be played, according to the rules of 1858 and with no gloves. The Chicago Salmon will take on the Blue Island Brewmasters (both members of the Vintage Baseball Association) in this game that is free for everyone. The game will be held at Lindberg Park in Oak Park (Greenfield St. between Marion St. and Woodbine Ave.).

Saturday, June 8, 10 am to 1 pm

Third Annual Vintage Car Show

See dozens of beautiful and rare vintage automobiles on the streets around the museum when we present the third annual Vintage Car Show, co-sponsored by the Oak Park Vintage Auto Club at OPRF Museum.

This family-friendly event includes food trucks as well as music provided by Oak Park's School of Rock. OPRF



Museum will be open with free admission during the car show.

Wednesday through Saturday, 1 to 5 pm OPRF High School Exhibit Continues

"Ever Changing, Yet the Same: OPRF High School at 150," our newest exhibit, celebrates the 150th anniversary of Oak Park and River Forest High School. Many artifacts and photos that tell the school's story are on display. The exhibit is free to members. Regular admission applies to all others.

Visit oprfmuseum.org/events for the latest updates and announcements about these and other great coming events from OPRF Museum



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This photo from our archives shows the Ridgeland Commons sledding and toboggan hill, which was removed 10 years ago as part of the park renovation. Unfortunately, the photo is undated. Can you help identify the year or anyone in the photo? If you can, please contact us at 708-848-6755.

Celebrate Black History Month with OPRF Museum *People and Places That Matter:* *Oak Park Black History Bike or Car Tour*



The site of the former Mt. Carmel Baptist Church on Westgate is just one of the 16 stops on our Black History tour.

Take a tour of 16 sites in Oak Park and learn more about Black history in our Oak Park community with the "Black History Bike Tour." This self-guided tour is not just for bikers and, especially in winter, can also be done by car. Stop by OPRF Museum during open hours for a tour booklet, or use this QR code to download a PDF from our website.

