

A History of Mott Community College/Lapeer

Before 1993, people looking for higher education in the Lapeer area found it very limited. Local offerings were generally held in schools or churches, usually at night. Those who had transportation and desire could drive to college campuses in Flint or Port Huron.

Also, at this time there were many changes taking place in Lapeer. "Oakdale" or "The Michigan Home" was rumored to close. The social philosophy at that time was to provide a "home" for individuals who were not mentally capable of coping with life in the community or were epileptic. Governor John T. Rich, who secured the "home" for the Lapeer area, (he was from Lapeer) gave the following address in his "Messages of Governor of Michigan." He advised that the state facility in Lapeer "could not receive inmates until appropriations for furnishings were made. If they were made early, it would be ready for occupancy sometime in March of 1895. The present buildings consist of two cottages, capable of accommodating 100 patients each. From present indications some additional accommodations will be necessary, independent of the provisions for the epileptics now confined in several asylums for the insane." The Michigan Home for the Feeble Minded and Epileptics opened in August of 1895 and closed October 1st, 1991.

According to David Trudge, the last administrator, during those years it grew to accommodate a population as high as 4,500 inmates and 1,450 staff. The name of the "home" would change during the years. It began as the "Michigan Home for the Feeble Minded and Epileptic. In 1913 it was renamed the Michigan Home and Training School. In 1937 it became the Lapeer State Home and Training School. Finally it was called the Oakdale Regional Center for Developmental Disabilities. For over ninety-six years, it was a major source of income for many families in and around the Lapeer area.

But more than names were changing by the late 1980's. The headline in the August 2, 1989 *Flint Journal* read, "CITY OFFICIALS HOPE OAKDALE BECOMES A COLLEGE, NOT A PRISON." Spokesmen for two community colleges indicated they would consider establishing a permanent campus in Lapeer if enough interest was shown. Department of Corrections officials have expressed an interest in using the facility as a prison if it is closed. City officials, adamantly opposed to conversion to a prison, said the best option from the city's viewpoint is for the facility to become a community college. City Manager George Strand stated that he planned to contact community colleges in the area to see if they were interested. To the east was St. Clair County Community College in Port Huron, the president of which said he would consider such a move. To the west was Mott Community College in Flint, which had offered a handful of courses in Lapeer for several years. That fall of 1989, Mott Community College was offering eight college classes at Lapeer West High School.

On February 16, 1990, the *Flint Journal* headline was "PRISON OR COLLEGE FOR OAKDALE FACILITY?" The article stated, "George Strand, City Manager is one of several local officials lobbying for the placement of a community college, rather than a prison."

Progress was made in the intervening months and on March 4, 1992 the *Lapeer County Press* reported, "Mott Community College Board Okays Oakdale Campus. The MCC Board of Trustees was silent last week about the satellite campus on the grounds of Oakdale Regional Center. For Gary Sullinger, MCC's Executive Director of College Relations, this silence during a meeting in Flint was as good as a go-ahead."

The headline in the October 1992 issue of *Neighbors*, the City of Lapeer's quarterly newsletter, announced "STATE CLOSES OAKDALE." The article stated, "The State of Michigan Department of Health announces the final closing of the Michigan State Home for Mental Rehabilitation, known as Oakdale. Once the largest facility of its kind, it was at one time the largest employer in the city of Lapeer."

The December 31, 1992 issue of *Neighbors* reported, "The City of Lapeer holds the deed to Oakdale after legislation is passed that approves the sale of Oakdale for \$1 with use restrictions. The site could be used only for local government and public education."

Demolition at the old Oakdale facility was a huge project. Many of the buildings were old and in disrepair. In the final appraisal, two buildings were saved: building #45, which had been a nursery and built in 1958, and Building #71, which had been the administration building. A grant from the Community Foundation of Greater Flint for \$180,000 brought building #45 up to school safety codes. Building #71 which was a newer building, received a \$1.3 million transformation into Chatfield School, the county's first charter school. According to the *Neighbors* newsletter, total demolition of Oakdale for \$550,000 returned the property to a clean site ready for development. A grant for that amount was funded by the state's "Clean Michigan" program.

The Fall 1993 *Neighbors* announced, "RENOVATED MOTT/LAPEER CAMPUS ALMOST COMPLETE." According to that report, "the new Mott Community College/Lapeer Campus sign at the corner of Millville and east M-21 stands as a tribute to three years of joint effort between the city of Lapeer and Mott Community College. This will be finalized as 905 students currently enrolled in Mott classes in two sites in Lapeer relocate to the renovated classrooms at Oakdale." It went on to say, "Oakdale Offers Unique Programs to Lapeer" and "Eight classrooms and computer lab will provide the setting for 70 classes with two new programs; Total Quality Management and Pre-Engineering."

The City of Lapeer planned a new DeMille/Millville corridor, a boulevard street, the first of its kind in Lapeer County. The project would give the city an additional east-west connection and will also provide access to Building #45, now Mott Community College. The project was estimated to cost \$2.4 million and was funded from a special assessment district, general obligation bonds and the city's Tax Increment Finance Authority.

Community leaders looked to make the connection with Mott Community College a permanent one and sought to have Lapeer incorporated into the MCC college district. Voters, however, had different ideas. On April 3, 1995 Lapeer area voters rejected the plan to join MCC's district by a 2-to-1 ratio, mainly because of the higher taxes it would entail. At the time MCC President Allen D. Arnold said, "I think that is a disappointment for the community. The opportunity for economic growth that a community college can bring is not going to be there for the Lapeer area."

But the community didn't give up and on October 18, 1995, the *Flint Journal* reported "MOTT CC, CITY AGREE TO TWO-YEAR RENTAL PACT." The article stated, "Flint's Mott Community College will operate a Lapeer Campus for at least the next two years. The City Commissioners have approved a second two-year contract with MCC. It will pay at least \$100,000 rent for the next two years. That's the same it's paid for the two previous years. That includes utilities and maintenance. But the rent will increase with rising student enrollment. MCC will also be allowed to sub-lease classrooms in the 50,000-square-foot building. The Detroit College of Business, Ferris State University and the University of Michigan-Flint are potential renters. The building, once a nursery and classroom is one of about two dozen on the 191-acre former Oakdale Center for the Developmentally Disabled. The city bought the campus and buildings more than two years ago for \$1."

This progressed well under the new plan and in the Winter 1997 issue of *Neighbors*, Lapeer City Manager George Strand made the following statement: "In the final analyses, I am confident that, even though the Oakdale project has had its difficulties, it is truly a successful project!"

Enrollment at Mott Community College/Lapeer rose steadily and soon the parking proved inadequate for the needs of the students. The Fall 1999 issue of *Neighbors* reported, "Mott Parking Lot Expansion Completed." According to the article "the project includes a new access drive to DeMille Boulevard which can be used by students at both Mott University Center and Chatfield School. Also a 67-space parking lot is under construction along with a drop-off area at the north entrance. The \$449,000 project is being paid for by Mott Community College as part of their recent 3 year extension on their lease with the city."

In the year 2000, a landmark contract was signed between Mott Community College and the City Of Lapeer for a five-year lease for the Mott Community College Campus in Lapeer. All prior contracts had been for two or three years.

After ten years on Campus, Mott Community College continues to grow. The Lapeer Campus Seat Count History shows in 1993, total seat count was 1,813. By 2003, total seat count was 4,728. During those years, the increase in total seat count has more than doubled. Cumulative seat count for Mott Community College's Lapeer Campus has reached 30,701.

Mott Community College/Lapeer has been very fortunate in having outstanding directors. Mary Lea Webster-Adkins was with MCC/Lapeer until 1998. She is now retired and living in Arizona. The current director, Wanda Dowd, took over in 1998.

In speaking of MCC Campus, Wanda comments on their "new biology lab that opened in 2002. It contains human muscular male and female torsos. This science lab is important because it allows students to complete another education requirement in Lapeer. It has been a fantastic year. We held summer classes for the first time. Both fall and winter semester have shown growth of 35-40%. In fact, we have had enrollment increases for the last seven semesters. In our ten year history, we have exceeded the 25,000 enrollment mark."

Dowdall went on to say, "The addition of upper-level offerings has been well received by students. A wider variety of classes have also proven to be important. Classes on Art Appreciation, the Holocaust, the History of Mexico, Pharmacology & Therapeutics, and Principles of Mental Health have been added this past year. Lapeer is a good place for students to begin their college education. It has a pleasant atmosphere and we're not too big. Students feel comfortable here."

When asked to comment on recent enrollment increases, she just shakes her head in disbelief and smiles, "The Lapeer site just keeps getting better and better and just goes on and on."

One special project of interest to the site is the Lapeer Learner Golf Outing. This is held each year for the purpose of raising scholarship money for deserving students who reside in Lapeer County. This year the proceeds will fund six scholarships (up to \$500) as well as contribute to the endowment for the Foundation of Mott Community College.

At Mott Lapeer, Wanda says "community" is our middle name. The community of Lapeer is well served by the number of community activities in which the Mott College campus is involved. In addition to the Lapeer Learner's Golf Outing, the American Red Cross holds several blood drives in the building each year. LACADA often holds workshops and special programs at MCC while

the Lapeer Area Chamber of Commerce holds its monthly Wake Up Lapeer Breakfast there. The annual Family Fun Day is held each July rain-or-shine while MCC staff and students also participate annually in Zonta's Fantasy Forest, Just for You Day and the Lapeer Days Summer Festival.

One thing is certain, MCC Lapeer Campus and its involvement in the community will continue to grow, and their academic influence will prevail in the coming years.