

RETURN SERVICE REQUESTED



Brighton Gardens — A Community within a Community — Part 1
Submitted by: Suzanne (Campbell) Conerway

In 1919 my godfather, realtor Birney Walker Smith, had a dream of finding land in the country, not far from Detroit where African-Americans could leave the city and enjoy the old-fashioned country fun of picnicking, swimming, dancing and just enjoying a peaceful environment. Birney Smith was what we would call today, a **visionary**! He founded what is known today as Brighton Gardens, located west of Old US 23 and north of Spencer Road. Next year Brighton Gardens will celebrate not only 100 years as a part of the Brighton community, but we will also celebrate “Uncle Birney” as I call him.

Driving west was not easy in 1919 in his Model T, since there weren’t any expressways. The drive averaged over an hour on gravel and dirt. When Uncle Birney turned off Old Grand River, onto Pleasant Valley Road and then to Spencer Road, he came upon the eighty-acre Gould farm. A part of the property was on Spencer Road, and led to a beautiful field filled with many trees, small hills and what is now known as Lyons Lake. It was a perfect place for Uncle Birney’s dream, a place he would call his “Promise Land!”

Birney Smith did not encounter resistance from the local residents and was welcomed as he started to make changes to the eighty acres. The old cow trails would become gravel roads off US 23 leading to the pavilion where those who came from Detroit would gather. The lake would host boat rides, swimming and fishing. Some of the families that welcomed Uncle Birney and his plans included the George Ratz family, the Leith family and the Hynes, the Pitkins, the Bidwells, the Rolison and Folands, all families that are a part of Brighton’s proud history.

Mr. Ratz was the township clerk, and he helped Uncle Birney in the planning of the subdivision. Soon, many of the families that enjoyed Brighton Gardens began to buy property in the 1920’s, among them my dad, Charles Campbell. These homes become their summer homes.

In 1940, Uncle Birney’s son Carter Smith would purchase his home on the Spencer Road property and move his wife Billye and their children Ruth Ellen and Brian to Brighton to become year-round residents. Carter’s sister, Ina Jane would live with them, and in 1943, she became Brighton High School’s first African American graduate. In 1944, I became the first and only African American born in Brighton’s Mellus Hospital, and my parents decided to turn their summer home into a year-round home. About five other couples, averaging age of fifty, would follow in the late ‘40s and thus, Brighton became an integrated community.

St. Paul’s minister, Rev. Ross Wellwood visited the Gardens in 1947 and invited all families to church. In those days, St. Paul’s was the only church that invited African Americans. Eventually we would all join St. Paul’s, even those who were Baptist!

To be continued...