

# Ypsilanti GLEANINGS

Official publication of the Ypsilanti Historical Society, featuring articles and reminiscences of the people and places in the Ypsilanti area



SPRING 2017

## THE OCTAGON HOUSE



The octagon house as it appears on River Street.

### *And to think that I saw it not on Mulberry Street, but on River Street!*

BY JAN ANSCHUETZ

*This is another installment of "The River Street Saga," a series in which Jan has been writing about interesting buildings and people of River Street in Ypsilanti, Michigan.*

If President Thomas Jefferson and President James Madison were able to come back to life and walk down River Street today, they would feel right at home. Why? Because both presidents lived in octagon houses, and amazing River Street boasts one of these rare buildings at 114 River Street.

Jefferson, a self taught architect, designed several octagon (eight-sided) houses, and actually built one in 1806 called Poplar Forest on the 4,800 acre plantation he inherited from his father-in-law in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Lynchburg, Virginia. He

used it as a retreat and would visit it about four times each year. After his death it was inherited by a grandson and is now restored and part of the National Park System.

President James Madison and his wife Dolly found refuge in an octagon house in Washington D. C. when the White House was burned by the British during the War of 1812. It was here, in this octagon "acting" White House, that the Treaty of Ghent was signed which ended the war. This building is now home to the American Institute of Architects and is supposed to be haunted by Dolly Madison, who is said to still entertain unearthly spirits in its large rooms.

The octagon house on River Street has a less impressive but still interesting past. It was moved to River Street in 1966, two years before our family moved to River Street and oc-

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## From the PRESIDENT'S DESK

BY ALVIN E. RUDISILL

**D**uring the last week of March members of the Board of Trustees will be interviewing applicants from the Graduate Program in Historical Preservation from Eastern Michigan University for the position of Museum Intern. Responsibilities for this position include assisting the Chair of the Museum Advisory Board with the management of the Museum and assisting the President of the Society with the details of managing the Society.

For the past two years the Museum Intern position has been held by Michael Gute. Michael will be graduating with his Master's Degree this spring and will be leaving us. He has done an exceptional job for us over the past two years and we will miss him. Fortunately there will be some overlap with the individual filling the position so Michael will be able to assist us in training the new Intern.

Our volunteers do an exceptional job of designing and setting up many



The volunteer crew taking down the Christmas tree.

different displays in the Museum throughout the year. Probably the biggest job of all is decorating the Museum for the Christmas season. Close to 100 boxes of decorations have to be taken down from the attic and then set up throughout all the rooms of the Museum. Just setting up the Christmas tree requires a crew of four people. Thanks to all those who were involved in setting up and taking down the Christmas season decorations.

If you are not on our email listserv please call the Museum at 734-482-4990 and have your name added. We are using the listserv only for program notifications and your email address will not be shared with others. Also, please check the Event Schedule on our website for upcoming special programs and displays.

**City Council Article:** "Please note that the *Spring Issue of the Gleanings* is scheduled to be distributed on or around April 1, April Fool's Day."



Michael Gute has served as the Museum Intern for the past two years.



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When the River Street house was originally situated at 915 Washtenaw Avenue it had features such as a porch surrounding the eight sides, French doors leading out to the porch, and a cupola located at the center of the roof.

cupies a spot which was once famous for a grizzly murder committed in 1860. The house that was previously on this lot was owned by a butcher named G. W. Washburn. In *The History of Washtenaw County*, published in 1891, we read: "On Monday evening, May 22, 1860, Mrs. Lucy Washburn, wife of G. W. Washburn of Ypsilanti was found at the foot of the cellar stairs in her dwelling, dead. Upon discovery of the body an examination was made. The dress and hair of the deceased were somewhat disarranged, one of her shoes was found in a bedroom, and the other she had on her foot; there were appearances of blood about the nose and mouth, and marks as of the grasp of a hand on the throat and neck, and some other immaterial bruises. In the bedroom spoken of there were two beds. One of them was disarranged, and on the underside of the tick of the feather bed were found spots of apparently fresh blood, and there were appearances about the room that indicated that a struggle had taken place. Mr. Washburn, the husband of the dead woman was a butcher by trade, and somewhat addicted to the use of liquor. He had not been living with

his wife for some time, but had been down to see her frequently, and at the time of her death had commenced an action for divorce. When found he was in his room at the hotel, asleep, or in bed." Further research provides the information that Mr. Washburn was arrested and tried for the murder of his wife. A jury found him guilty, and he was sentenced to 15 years in prison. This house was occupied by a multitude of families after that, with the last recorded resident listed in the city directory in 1962 after which time it is presumed that the home was razed.

The octagon house which now occupies the lot was originally situated at 915 Washtenaw Avenue and can be seen in all of its glory in the 1868 birds-eye map of Ypsilanti. It was located on a large lot and had typical octagon house features such as a porch surrounding the eight sides, French doors leading out to the porch, and a cupola located at the center of the roof line. It is probable that the house was built by William McAndrew, who was a carpenter and built the only other octagon house in Ypsilanti in 1854. The house was built for his home and the health spa and

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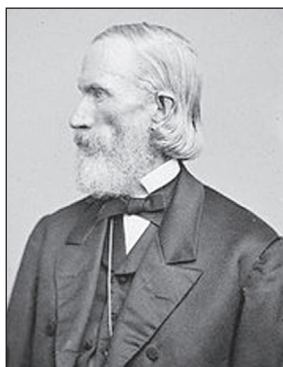
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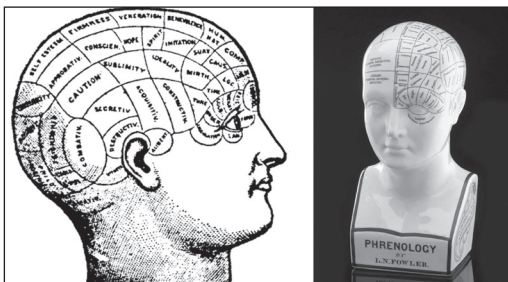
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offices of his wife, Helen, who was the first female physician in Washtenaw County. It was located at 105 South Huron Street on a bank high above the Huron River.

Most octagon houses were built in the 1850s and 1860s following the publication of a book promoting them. Orson Squire Fowler, wrote the book *A Home for All, or A New Cheap, Convenient and Superior Mode of Building* in 1848, and went on a lecture tour to sell his book and educate the public about octagon houses. Fowler was already famous for his theory called phrenology which was the idea that the shape of one's skull would determine a person's character.



Orson Squire Fowler, wrote the book *A Home for All, or A New Cheap, Convenient and Superior Mode of Building* in 1848.



Before writing his book promoting octagon houses Orson Squire Fowler was already famous for his theory called phrenology which was the idea that the shape of one's skull would determine a person's character.

While selling his idea of the benefits of building and living in an eight-sided structure, he enthused that the building would be cheaper to build, offer more living space, provide more natural light, and be easier to heat in the winter and cool in the summer due to it's shape which would minimize external surface area and minimize the loss of heat. Generally these homes were two or three stories high and also had a porch surrounding them with French doors or large windows which would allow access to the outside from all sides. Gutters led fresh rain water to a cistern which could be nestled in the basement and provided clean and healthy water. Often there was a central square room with pie shaped bedrooms surrounding it. Part of the reason that this was considered a healthy house was because there would be a cupola on the roof with windows, which when opened would draw the hot air up and out of the house allowing more fresh air to enter the rooms.

It is estimated that about 2,000 octagon homes were built in the United States prior to the Civil War, along with some octagon barns and churches. There was even one octagon "burial house" built in Canada to store bodies until a spring thaw would allow corpses to be buried in the ground. Over one hundred octagon houses were built in Michigan alone. If you are curious about Michigan octagon houses, there is a wonderful web site at [www.octagon.bobanna.com/MI.ht](http://www.octagon.bobanna.com/MI.ht)

ml which provides an interesting inventory of these houses. Most of these buildings are now gone, which would have been the fate of our River Street octagon house had it not been saved by Nat and Dr. William Edmunds, of Ypsilanti, along with a visionary group named Project 73.

We read in The Ypsilanti Press of September 25, 1965 that the Liberty Land Company of Ann Arbor purchased the home from Mrs. Gordon Lamb, Sr., primarily for the lot it was on which was 170 feet by 150 feet, with the idea of tearing down this unusual home and building an apartment house. In the article, a spokesman for the company states "if it is necessary to dispose of the house he has no objection to making it available to preservation if the city or any historical group wants it." By January 20, 1966 The Ypsilanti Press proclaims in headlines "*Project 73, BPW Club study plan to move, preserve octagonal house*". The article tells us that Dr. William P. Edmunds, chairman of Project 73 and Kenneth Leighton had made a presentation to the Business Women's Club of Ypsilanti to seek support of plans to save the octagon home. "*Project 73, the plan for observance of the sesquicentennial of Ypsilanti, is proposing a package offer under which the house would be moved to a River St. location, a basement and heating plant installed and utilities connected ready for occupancy at a total estimated cost of \$30,000.*" The basement would then be available as a large meeting room with apartment rentals above which would then pay for this move.

Soon after, on May 5, 1966 the octagon house moved to River Street! Some say that the entire city watched this 43 foot wide house (two feet wider than the street it was being moved on) and 32 feet high (taller than the electrical and phone lines) being pulled by a crane from its previous foundation on Washtenaw Avenue. Linemen moved in front of the slowly moving hulk-of-a-house which was placed on 32 tires to support its weight, in order to lift and then let down wires as the octagon slowly lumbered by. In an article in The Ypsilanti Press written by Eileen M. Harrison on that fateful day we read "*Watchers marveled at the efficiency of the crews as big limbs were sawed into sections and taken*



This 1868 birds-eye map of Ypsilanti shows the octagon house on the original lot located at 915 Washtenaw Avenue.





This octagon house was built in 1798 in Washington, D.C. and occupied by President Madison in 1814 when the White House was burned by the British.

to curbsides. Many residents deserted their dinners and stood in shirtsleeves and aprons, too fascinated to return for coats.” The most skill was required in navigating the house down the hill on Michigan Avenue. The article goes on to describe this descent “At the top of Michigan Ave. hill it was cabled to two trucks at the rear to keep it from rolling too rapidly and the next stop was at the base of the hill beyond the bridge while the trucks were detached.” These were no ordinary trucks, but trucks which were custom made with wheels both front and back that could be turned in any direction to maneuver such a huge load.

The move itself required a huge crew of experienced men. We read: “The telephone company had a crew of seven men, the Detroit Edison four men plus some who helped in emergency tree trimming, and C. P. Myers of Trenton, the mover used six men. In addition, the state highway department had a crew handling traffic signals and signs.”

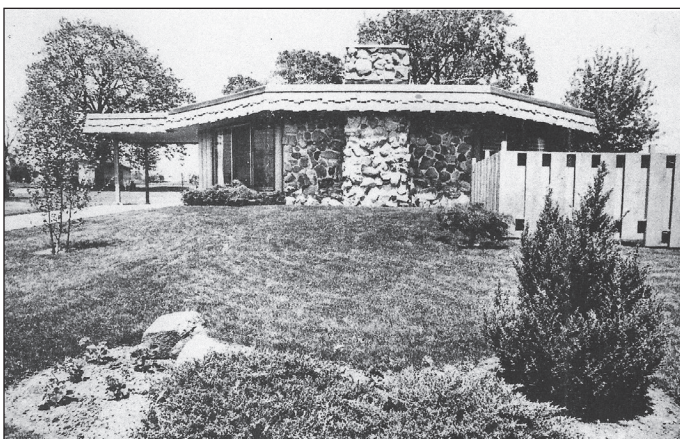
In a matter of hours, this historic home was at rest in the parking lot of the Lutheran Church, across from its intended lot on River Street, awaiting one last move when the foundation was ready.

In the Ypsilanti Press article from September 28, 1966, we learn that the octagon house had been moved to the lot at 114 River Street and was being supported by beams while a large basement was prepared. Two years later, the house was offered for sale. The Ypsilanti Press, in an article from November 5, 1968 provides us with information that the “house’s exterior has been extensively remodeled by Kenneth Leighton, a real estate dealer, and treasurer of Project 73. Leighton said the house needs a furnace as well as extensive work inside – all estimated to cost \$10,000 to \$15,000. He said it is on land zoned for low-density apartments. Project 73 is not defunct he added, but has abandoned hope that the octagon house – only one of two in the city and about 100 in the nation – would be nucleus for Ypsilanti’s ‘Heritage Square’ proposed for the N. River area.” The asking price of the house was \$35,000.



President Jefferson designed and built this octagon house called Poplar Forest in 1806 on the 4,800 acre plantation he inherited from his father-in-law in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains near Lynchburg, Virginia.

But the house didn’t sell at that time and by March, 1972 a sheriff’s auction was held when it was repossessed by The National Bank of Ypsilanti. The octagon house still graces River Street and now hosts SOS Crisis Center which provides needed social services to the community. This unique



Gleanings editor Al Rudisill and his family lived in this three bedroom, two bathroom, octagon house in Cedar Falls, Iowa from 1971 to 1980. A unique feature of the house was the lava rock wall around the master bathroom in the center of the house and on the inside of the front wall of the house that featured a fireplace.

home has survived a crisis of its own with a threatened demolition, but has been saved through the imagination and hard work of dedicated members of the community. And to think that you can see it, not on Mulberry Street, but on River Street in Ypsilanti - a wonderful place to live.

(Janice Anschuetz is a local history buff and a regular contributor to the Gleanings.)

# City Council to Consider Proposal

LOCAL NEWS

**L**ong time Ypsilanti entrepreneur and community volunteer, Les Heddle, has submitted a proposal to the Ypsilanti City Council that will raise one million dollars to pay down the Water Street debt. Heddle is a local conservative who is an active member of The Fletcher Forum and the Ypsilanti Morning Coffee Club and has long been interested in and concerned about the Water Street debt.

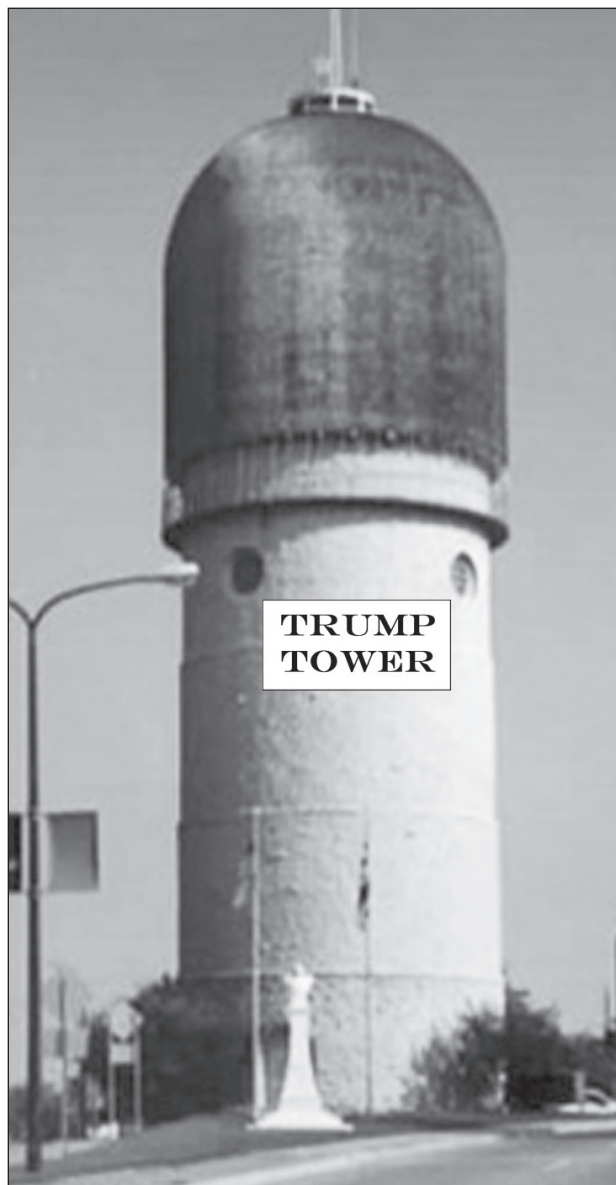
Heddle's proposal involves the sale of advertising rights on the Ypsilanti Water Tower, a local historic site that is one of the most viewed structures in Southeastern Michigan. Heddle has spent considerable time developing the proposal and has even contacted several individuals and corporations who may be interested in purchasing the advertising rights to the Water Tower.

One corporation contacted was the Trump organization. Heddle commented that: *"President Donald Trump seems very interested in developing a positive image and it would make sense to have his name associated with a structure that people view as an interesting and valuable commodity."* Heddle has contacted the group that is now in charge of managing the Trump organization and they have worked with Heddle to develop the proposal that the City Council will consider at their next meeting.

The proposal involves selling the advertising rights on the Water Tower to the Trump organization for one million dollars for the period of years that Trump is serving as President of the United States, which will be four or eight years. Further, that during this period of time the Ypsilanti City Council would need to take action to name the Water Tower the "Trump Tower."

When long time City Council member Pete Murdock was contacted about the proposal he indicated: *"The proposal to sell advertising rights is very interesting but I would certainly not be interested in having Trump's name on the Tower. If the rights could be sold to the Clintons or the Obamas then I could support the proposal."*

Further information about this article can be found in the "From the President's Desk" on page 2 of this issue.



Proposed paid advertising on the Ypsilanti Water Tower that the City Council will consider at their next meeting.



# Museum Board Report

BY NANCY WHEELER, BOARD CHAIR

The Museum is ready for spring whenever it decides to really come! On January 20, we scrubbed, waxed, polished, dusted, mopped, and made the Museum sparkle with what we call "deep cleaning." A big THANKS to the 16 volunteers who worked all day!

A beautiful 1900s child's rocking chair that belonged to Miriam Carey Peters was donated by her daughter Marcia Peters. It is on display in the Formal Parlor.

New exhibits are sheet music and pencils in the Library, bibles in the upstairs hall, and a Quimper Ware French Vase and a collection of small items labeled, "What is it," in the kitchen. The toy room is now a one room school complete with a teacher, books and students, one of whom did not get his work done!



1900s child's rocking chair that belonged to Miriam Carey Peters.

Virginia Davis Brown is preparing a new exhibit, "Did You Know?" It will begin in May and go through the summer. More information will be in the next Gleanings.



One room schoolhouse on exhibit now.

The restroom has been painted, papered and pampered. Bill and Karen Nickels volunteered many hours on this.

Sorry, we will not have a High Tea this year. We are planning a Quilt Exhibit for the fall.

As always, we need more Docents. Call us at 734-482-4990 to volunteer.

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# Owen Jenks Cleary - PUBLIC SERVANT AND PATRIOT

BY PATRICK R. CLEARY II

On a sunny day in June of 1922, a sporty 1921 black Ace Roadster roared up Pearl Street, turned left onto Normal street, and pulled up in front of 7 North Normal, the Cleary residence.

Owen Cleary, 22 years of age, jumped out of the Ace and ran up the steps to tell his mother, Helen Jenks Cleary, that he intended to transfer from the Michigan State Normal College (now Eastern Michigan University) to the University of Michigan.

Owen Jenks Cleary was born on February 4, 1900, in Ypsilanti, Michigan to P. Roger and Helen Jenks Cleary in their home on Forest Avenue. Owen was the fourth child born to the couple. Owen was a precocious young man and enjoyed life in his early home on Forest Avenue. He attended elementary school at the Normal Training School and served as an acolyte at St. Luke's Episcopal Church on Huron Street. Later, he graduated from Ypsilanti High School at age 17 and began taking classes at Cleary College.

P. Roger Cleary was President of Cleary Business College that, at that time, was located on the northwest corner of Michigan Avenue and Adams Street. Cleary had founded the institution in 1883 and erected the building in 1891. The College was to play a major role in young Owen's life.

In July 1918, Owen was one of four young men chosen by the president of Michigan State Normal College, Charles McKenny, for a special Army Reserve Officer's Training Corps (ROTC) assignment at Ft. Sheridan, Illinois. Upon completion of the program, Owen was commissioned a second lieutenant and qualified as a small arms (i.e., pistols and rifles) instructor. He was then sent to Camp Perry, Ohio, where he instructed others in the use of small arms. In September 1918, he transferred to Michigan State College in East Lansing as a small arms instructor. Thus, he became a commissioned officer and an instruc-



Owen Jenks Cleary at three years of age.



1921 Ace Coupe and Owen Cleary in 1922.

tor in just three months, and at age 18, was one of the youngest commissioned officers in the U.S. Army.

In December 1918 Owen was mustered out of active duty and returned to Ypsilanti where he resumed his studies at Cleary College. In 1920, he finished his studies at Cleary College and enrolled at Michigan State Normal College. While there, Owen's abiding interest in military affairs continued, so 18 months after his discharge from the Army he enlisted in the Michigan National Guard. He was again commissioned, as a Second Lieutenant in the Guard, in June 1921. The following October he was promoted to First Lieutenant. He completed his studies and received his Life Teaching Certificate from Michigan State Normal College in 1922.

To continue his education Owen matriculated to the University of Michigan in the fall of 1922. He paid his way through the University utilizing his Life Teaching Certificate. He received his BA from the University of Michigan in 1925 from the



2nd Lieutenant Owen J. Cleary in the U.S. Army in 1918.



College of Liberal Arts. In 1924, however, while attending the University of Michigan, Owen joined the staff at Cleary College, where he began teaching international law, parliamentary law, and salesmanship.

One of Owen's pastimes was participating in the Ypsilanti Players, a group of young residents who enjoyed the theater and acting. D. L. Quirk was the leader of the group, which had experienced notable success over the years from 1915 well into the thirties. In 1925, Owen



Steamer "Hamonic, circa 1925.

was cast with opposite a young woman from Bay City in a one-act play called "Today." This young woman, Marie DeWaele, who was attending Michigan State Normal College to gain her Life Teaching Certificate, was living with her aunts, Elizabeth and Ethel McCrickett, at their home on Washtenaw Ave. Owen was smitten with Marie and they began dating.

At the same time, Owen had enrolled in the University of Detroit Law School. He attended during the evening while working during the day; and after five years, earned his Doctor of Jurisprudence in 1931. He was also inducted into the Phi Beta Kappa academic honor society.

During their courtship, Marie had received her teaching certificate and was teaching at the Monteith School in Detroit. Owen was still actively teaching at Cleary College. He also remained active with the National Guard, being promoted to Captain and given command of the Headquarters Company, 32<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division, in 1928. Further, he was actively involved with the American Legion (as commander of Post 282 of Ypsilanti) as well as the Rotary Club.

Owen and Marie's romance continued, with Owen eventually proposing marriage. However, there was a snag. Marie's mother was a devout Catholic, and when Marie informed her of Owen's proposal, her mother adamantly denied her blessing on the marriage, because Owen was a protestant.

Owen eventually told Marie that she had to make a decision, which she did. Without the approval of her parents, they were married on August 17, 1929, in the priory at the University of Detroit and left on their honeymoon right

away, which included a stay at the Gratiot Inn in Port Huron and a voyage on the Steamer "Hamonic" from Detroit to Duluth, Minnesota. Upon arrival in Duluth, Marie sent a telegram to her father and mother notifying them of their marriage. They had eloped!

In November 1931, Owen was admitted to the Michigan State Bar. That same month, Marie gave birth to a baby girl, Catherine Ann Cleary. In December, Owen formed his law firm with good friend, George Weins, all while continuing his work at Cleary College.



Owen and Marie circa 1929.

The stock market crash of 1929 occurred just two months after Owen and Marie were married. While it did not initially affect the newlyweds, three years later on February 14, 1933, the governor of Michigan

declared a bank holiday. This was devastating to many of the residents of southeast Michigan who had their money in Edsel Ford's bank, The Guardian National Bank of Commerce. Henry Ford had refused to support his son's bank to keep it afloat. Both the Cleary family and Cleary College suffered the loss of their funds in that bank.

As the depression wore on, Owen worked to grow his law practice and help his father manage the College. Later in 1934, Owen and Marie's second child, Patrick Roger Cleary II was born.

In the mid-1930s, Owen became involved in military counter-intelligence activity with the National Guard that included attending labor organization meetings staged by people, many of whom had suspected ties to the Communist Party. These activities were frequent in southeast Michigan as labor leaders strove to get concessions from the automobile companies. In pursuit of his duties in the Guard counter-intelligence Division Owen attended one meeting with his service .45 pistol in his overcoat pocket. The coat fell off his chair and landed with a thud. He allowed as how he got a little concerned when heads turned around to find



Brigadier General Colliday, Governor Harry Kelly and Colonel Owen J. Cleary in 1943.

out where the noise came from.

By 1936, Owen had been promoted to Vice President and Assistant to the President of Cleary College. The austere effects of the depression were beginning to ease and his law practice was growing. In 1938, however, events took an adverse turn for Owen and Marie.

Owen had been evidencing symptoms of stomach ulcers for the past 18 months and was finally admitted to the University of Michigan hospital in mid-1938. Ultimately, he underwent a partial gastric resection of his stomach. Antibiotics had not been developed at that time, nor had penicillin been discovered. The anti-infection drugs then in use were of the Sulfanilamide family that were only minimally effective. As a result of the surgery, Owen contracted a severe infection that led to an eleven-month stay in the hospital. He faced death on a regular basis.

He said to Marie one day in December 1938, as he looked out the window of the snow-covered hills of Ann Arbor, *"If I survive this, I will devote my life to public service."* And survive he did. Owen had tremendous will power and courage, traits that would continue to be displayed in the coming years.

By 1940, Owen's father, P.R. Cleary, had decided to retire, and in September 1940, the Cleary College Board of Trustees named Owen President of Cleary College. By that time, Owen had regained much of his health and his law practice was doing well.

In June 1940, France fell to the Germans, and the Battle of Britain commenced a month later. In October, the 32<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Division of the Michigan National Guard, Owen's military unit, was activated. The division consisted of men from both Michigan and Wisconsin. In early 1940 Michigan units had been ordered to Detroit for Physical examinations to determine fitness for service. While Owen reported to Detroit, he found that he was not able to serve actively due to his prior surgical history.



Cleary College President P.R. Cleary (right) and Vice-President Owen J. Cleary (left) circa 1936.

With the activation of the Michigan National Guard, the Governor established a volunteer organization designated the Michigan State Troops (MST) to replace the Guard. Volunteers for this group were those who were unable to serve with the active military by virtue of age or physical reasons. Owen immediately volunteered for this unit and was promoted to Major, MST in April 1940.

As the U.S. began preparations for war in 1940 and 1941, Civil Defense became a primary concern. In 1941, the Michigan Office of Civil Defense was established. Following the Pearl Harbor attack, Owen was promoted to Lt. Colonel, MST and in January 1942, Governor Luren Dickinson named Owen as Michigan's Chief Air Raid Warden under the Office of Civil Defense.

In December 1942, Owen was promoted to Colonel, MST and given command of the Detroit district. In early 1943, after a reorganization of the MST, he was given command of the 31<sup>st</sup> Infantry Regiment with headquarters in Detroit, where he remained for the duration of the war.

With Owen focusing on his military duty after Pearl Harbor, his father temporarily resumed the presidency at the College.

When the war ended on August 15, 1945, Governor Harry Kelly asked Owen to remain on active duty and promoted him to Brigadier General, MST. Owen was then asked by the governor to direct the re-organization of the returning service members of the Michigan National Guard, which he completed by late 1946. He retired from the MST in January 1947. Of note, during that period, Owen ran for Lieutenant Governor of Michigan, losing to Eugene Keyes in the Republican Primary.

Also in 1946, Owen resumed his role as President of Cleary College, as well as his law practice. However, in January 1947, Owen again returned to public service. The new Governor, Kim Sigler, appointed Owen as Chairman of the Michigan Liquor Control Commission. He served on



the commission until 1949. An interesting footnote that illustrates Owen's outstanding integrity, involves his tenure on the commission. The junior member of the Michigan Liquor Control Commission, G. Mennen Williams, a Democrat, came to Owen when he was chairman and said, "Owen, next year I intend to run against Governor Sigler. What do you think I should do?" Owen responded, "Well Mennen, you need to tell that to the Governor." Tragically, Governor Sigler was killed shortly after that in an airplane accident. Williams ran against the Republican incumbent (former Lieutenant Governor Keyes) and won, serving as governor of Michigan for the next 12 years.

That same year, Owen was selected as Chairman of the Michigan State Republican Central Committee. The position required that he travel extensively throughout the state, and as a result, he was not able to attend to the day-to-day duties as President of Cleary College. So, he brought lawyer Walter Greig on as a Vice President of the College. Owen had met Walter during the War, when Owen was with the State Troops and Walter



The Honorable Owen J. "Pat" Cleary when he served as the Chairman of the Michigan Liquor Control Commission.

was serving with U.S. Army Intelligence in Lansing. Walter's job was to run the daily operations of the College and to keep Owen apprised of all developments. Walter was the first person outside the Cleary family to hold a high position in

the College. He would later become the College's fourth President.

One of Cleary College's biggest assets was Owen. He brought many influential people into contact with the College, including Gilbert Bursley, who also would become a President of Cleary College. Others such as Roscoe Bonisteel, Alvin Bentley, and Paul Ungrodt would become trustees. Owen served on the Michigan State Republican Central Committee until 1953 and was also chairman of the Midwest and Rocky Mountain State Chairman's Association from 1951 to 1953. He was also a member

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Parade on Michigan Avenue with Owen J. Cleary, Secretary of State circa 1953.

of the Republican National Committee in 1952 and 1953.

The high point in Owen's political career came in 1952, when he was elected Michigan's Secretary of State, a position that he held for two years.

Following completion of his term as Secretary of State in 1954, Owen returned to the College and his law practice. Five years earlier, he and his partner George Weins had decided to expand their firm and brought Paul Jackson and Edward Scallen on as partners. Thus, the firm became known as Cleary, Weins, Jackson, and Scallen.

During this time, he also resumed his duties as President of Cleary College. Owen's first order of business upon re-assuming full duties as President was to form a fundraising committee to raise money for a new building. The original building on the corner of Adams Street and Michigan Avenue was over 70 years old and badly outmoded. Friends of Owen's that were particularly active on this committee were Donald Silkworth and Daniel Quirk, successful Ypsilanti businessmen who were also trustees of the College. The committee ultimately raised over \$150,000, which was used to build a modern building on Washtenaw Avenue at the corner of Hewitt Road.

From 1954 to 1956, the College and Owen's law firm thrived. In 1957, however, while on vacation with Marie in Florida, fate dealt Owen a tragic blow. He slipped and fell on a wet floor and broke vertebrae in his neck. The doctors determined that surgery was not possible, and so Owen had to adjust to life in constant pain. However, like always, he rose above the challenge and continued his work running the College and the fundraising effort.

By mid-1960, the new building was under construction and Owen and Don Silkworth officiated at the laying of the cornerstone. However, the preceding three years of constant pain and loss of sleep had taken a terrific toll on Owen's body, and on September 9, 1960, he passed away at Beyer Memorial Hospital.

Owen is buried at Highland Cemetery in Ypsilanti, next to his beloved wife Marie, as well as his father and mother. After Owen's passing, for the first time in the 78 years since its founding, Cleary College did not have a Cleary at the



Donald Silkworth (left) and Owen Cleary at the 1960 cornerstone laying ceremony for the new building.

helm. Ypsilanti had lost a native son who had achieved great heights and led a great life of service to his city, his state, and his country. Owen Cleary was a true patriot.

*(Patrick Roger Cleary II has served on the Board of Trustees of Cleary University since 2003 and was recently named Vice-Chairman of the Board.)*

**Footnote:** *The following is an update on the article on the History of the Cleary Family In Ypsilanti (Gleanings, Summer 2016):*

Lieutenant Colonel Charles Kettles, U.S.ARMY (Ret.), husband of Ann Cleary Kettles was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Barak Obama at the White House on July 18, 2016. This award is an upgrade of the Distinguished Service Cross that previously had been awarded him for his heroism in combat on May 15, 1967.

Further, the article stated that Owen and Marie Cleary had two children, Ann and Patrick Roger II. The article omitted biographies of Ann's Children, Theresa (Terry), Catherine Ann (Cathy) Patrick Cleary Heck and Maria.

Terry is a professional actor, director and teacher of acting. She graduated from Eastern Michigan University with a Bachelor degree in Theatre and later received a Master's degree in Fine Arts from the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Terry has ap-



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peared in regional theatres in Minnesota, Texas, California and Michigan. During her tenure at Eastern Michigan University she has received numerous awards and honors for her work. She has also received a Teaching Excellence Award from the EMU Alumni Association and the Distinguished Faculty Award from EMU. She is married to John Seibert, also an actor and Director. They have one son, Joseph, and reside in Ann Arbor.

Cathy graduated from Eastern Michigan University with a Bachelor of Science degree in Occupational Therapy. During a highly successful twenty year career in that field she ascended to increasingly responsible positions culminating in being the Senior Coordinator for the Ingham County Regional Medical Center. Later Cathy worked with an occupational therapy group. Currently she is the Administrative Assistant to the Principal of Northview Public Schools. Cathy has two daughters, Caitlin Grace and Maggie Elizabeth from her marriage

to Robert Edwards. She is married to Dr. Richard Nezwiek. They reside in Rockford, Michigan.

Patrick Cleary Heck resides near Alpena, Michigan and is engaged in the construction business. He has two children, Patrick and Amber.

Maria is a Doctor of Osteopathy and practices primarily in Milan. Having practiced in Family Medicine for 15 years, she continually receives high ratings from Public Organizations, her peers and her patients. She is associated with CS Mott Children's Hospital, St. Joseph Mercy Hospital/ Oakland and St. Joseph Mercy Hospital/ Saline. She graduated from the University of Michigan and received her medical degree from Midwestern University College of Osteopathic Medicine in 2001. Following receipt of her medical degree she assumed the position of Chief Hospital Resident at Botsford General Hospital in Farmington Hills, Michigan. She resides in Saline.

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The Jenness House, located at 324 West Forest Street in Ypsilanti, was built in 1858.

# *The* JENNESS HOUSE

## *at* 324 West Forest

BY JAMES MANN

**T**he Italianate style house at 324 West Forest stands on the north side of the street, directly in line with Hamilton Street. This house was once one of the finest brick homes in Ypsilanti. Today, it houses apartments. The house was built in 1858 by John S. Jenness.

John Sedgwick Jenness was born in Vermont on October 15, 1811. His mother was a distant relative of Noah and Daniel Webster. He attended the district schools, but never realized his ambition to acquire a college education.

Jenness moved to Boston, where he was employed as a clerk in the office of Daniel Webster and a few years later accepted a clerkship with Abram French, who was engaged in the crockery business. Jenness acted as a salesman for the next few years.

On October 10, 1836, Jenness married Martha Jane Clark in Boston. The couple soon after moved to Detroit where Jenness sought better business opportunities. In Detroit he established a wholesale grocery store with his cousin, who was also named John S. Jenness. The two enjoyed a prosperous period of trade for several years, until the cousin withdrew from the firm. Then the new firm of Jenness & Fiske was founded. *"These gentlemen carried on a wholesale and retail crockery business for several years,"* and in

fact, noted Samuel W. Beakes in *The Past and Present of Washtenaw County*, published in 1906, *"Mr. Jenness was connected with the trade up to the time of his retirement. He had a splendid establishment, carrying a large and complete stock of goods and enjoying a trade which in volume and importance made his enterprise one of the leading commercial concerns of Detroit."*

His wife Martha died on August 11, 1849, in Detroit. The couple had one child. The year following the death of Martha, he married Lucy Jane Moore with whom he had six children. Two of the children died in infancy. Jenness decided to make his home in Ypsilanti, and moved here in 1858. That same year, he built the commodious brick residence at 324 West Forest Avenue. The house was constructed in the Italianate style, in typical cubic form, with a hip roof and a central front entrance door and porch. The house has large, ornate, roof cornice brackets that seem to support the broad overhangs. When the house was built, the roof was topped by a tall gallery, with twin round top windows on each side. The lovely gallery has long since disappeared, and has been replaced with a plain one.

Jenness had a branch crockery store in Ypsilanti, under the supervision of his brother-in-law Henry W. Moore. He built several buildings in Ypsilanti as well, including one on Hu-



ron Street which became known as the Jenness Block. At the same time he continued his business interest at Detroit, making the daily trip by train until his retirement.

On February 24, 1863, his second wife died. "A woman," reported *The Ypsilanti Commercial*, of Saturday, May 2, 1885, "by her sweet disposition and loving traits of character had won a host of friends in Detroit and here."

Jenness married Emma A. Ellis, of Ypsilanti, who would survive him. They would have three children, one of whom died at the age of five. In politics Jenness was a Republican and in 1866 was elected to represent the district in the state legislature where he served honorably for one term. Jenness was a member of the local Baptist Church, and played a major part in its development serving as church treasurer and collector for a number of years.

"He continued his commercial interests in Detroit," noted Beakes, "however, until, on account of advancing years and hardships attendant with the necessity of making daily trips to and from the city, he sold his business with the intention of living retired. Indolence and idleness, however, were utterly foreign to his nature, and he could not content himself without some business interest, so that for a short time he represented insurance companies here."

"In the summer of 1881," reported *The Ypsilanti Commercial*, "while on a mission in connection with the removal of the old Baptist church building to make a place for the new beautiful structure, Mr. Jenness was thrown out of a buggy; his shoulder was dislocated and other injuries received which not only deprived him of the use of his left arm, but affected his whole nervous system."

"With a brief intermission he continued his business as best he could, attending the meetings of the church, to the surprise of his friends, apparently exceeding his strength. He possessed a large amount of vitality, mental discipline and power of will, enabling him to triumph over much of the disability imposed by this sad calamity."

"He was attentive to his church duties," continued *The Ypsilanti Commercial*, "always in his seat at church, notwithstanding his infirmities. He occupied his pew the second Sabbath preceding his death. He made sacrifices to attend the other meetings of the church. At the last covenant meeting, April 4, he expressed his attachment to the church, and his wish to die in peace with all his brethren, and the world. His remarks were in the nature of a farewell."

John Sedgwick Jenness died at the age of 74, on April 22, 1885. "It was a great comfort to him," noted *The Ypsilanti Commercial* of May 2, 1885, "that so many of his children could be with him in the final hours. He appre-

ciated most of all the loving attentions during his affliction, of "Baby," the name he gave his youngest child, 12 years of age, who could fix papa in his chair as no one else could." The house remained in the family until 1930. It was turned into apartments during the Second World War, most likely to house workers at the Willow Run Bomber Plant.

(James Mann is a local author and historian, a volunteer in the YHS Archives, and a regular contributor to the *Gleanings*.)



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# TECHNOLOGY

BY JACK D. MINZEY



A typical pot bellied stove that sat in the middle of the room. It was first fueled by wood and later coal.

**I**t is interesting that the current generation believes that they are the first group of people to live in an “age of technology.” Actually, every generation has experienced their own technological advancement, and this will continue for future generations. Probably the two greatest technological ad-

vancements were the management of fire and the invention of the wheel.

I believe that the generation which witnessed the greatest growth in technology was my parent’s generation. They were born in 1895. In their lifetime, they saw the invention of the automobile, the airplane, radio and telephone with all the variations that went with those inventions. They lived long enough to see a man walk on the moon. That certainly had to be a momentous change in life for their generation.

My wife Esther and I were discussing which technological invention was the most significant in our lives. I selected central heating. When I was very young, we had a pot belly stove. It was fueled by wood and later coal. It sat in the middle of the room, and we gathered around it to keep warm. The problem was that it kept one side of you too warm while your other side was cold.

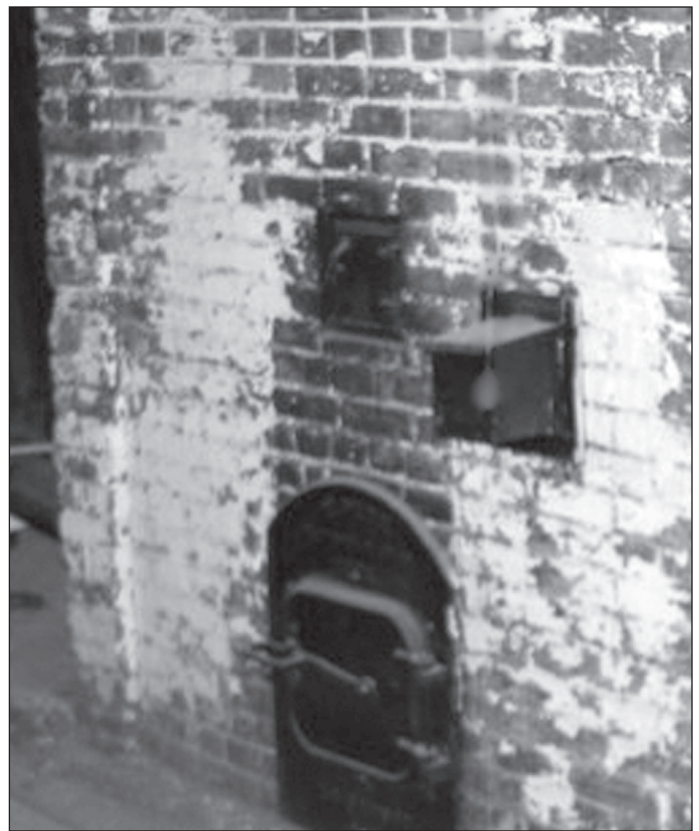
We later moved to a house with a furnace. A fire was built in the furnace, and the house was heated by gravity. Since heat was lighter than air, the heat rose through registers to the rest of the house. It was a slow process, but it served people for a long time. The furnace was fueled by coal. In every house was a coal bin which was a room for holding the coal. The coal was delivered by truck, and the coal usually was delivered by sending it through a coal chute in a window.

There were two kinds of coal, anthracite (hard coal) and bituminous (soft coal). The ideal was hard coal since it would burn longer. However, because of the cost, we burned soft coal. It burned faster and was very dusty. To fire the furnace, you needed to use paper and kindling to start a fire. Then you used a scoop or coal shovel to put the

coal on top of the fire in the furnace. When you first started the fire, you needed to open the damper which was a dial upstairs attached by a chain to the furnace. This allowed the furnace to receive more air and to burn faster. Once the fire was going well, you closed the damper which allowed the fire to burn more slowly.

Beneath the grates in the furnace was a place for ashes. Periodically, you would use a lever to shake the ashes from the grate to the place below. The result was that there would be ashes, clinkers and coke in the lower level. The clinkers were like melted iron which was taken to the dump. The coke was like hard coal and used to bank the fire at night. The ashes were taken out and used in the driveway. No one had paved or even gravel driveways. They were usually dirt tracks which developed ruts and holes and ashes served to fill in the bad spots.

To separate all the things in the ashes, it was necessary



Early furnaces were located in the basement and since heat was lighter than air, the heat rose through registers to the rest of the house. Early furnaces were fueled by wood or coal.



to use a screen and sift the ashes through the screen into a tub. The resulting coke was then used to bank the fire. This meant that when the furnace was filled at bed time, the coke would be placed in the final load of coal with the idea that it would burn all night. This never happened. When I went to bed at night, I knew that the furnace would go out before morning. I would roll up in an army blanket and then get down between flannel sheets. After a few hours, I could see my breath because the temperature in the house would be about forty degrees.

The first thing in the morning, someone had to build the fire. This was usually my Mother's job. My Dad was up and gone to work by about 6:00 a.m. My sister and I got up in time to be in school by 8:00 a.m. The house would not be warm until much later so every day we devised ways to dress while trying to keep warm. This usually meant that we stood in front of a register which was an opening in each room to allow the heat to enter. This was evidenced by the fact that above every register, the wall paper was very worn and defaced.

Later in my life, they invented the stoker. This was a device that sat beside the furnace. It was powered by electricity. The stoker held several pounds of coal, and as the fire went down, the stoker fed more coal in automatically. This eliminated the furnace from going out at night. For my family, however, we could never afford the stoker so we did not have a fire that stayed on all night until they developed furnaces powered by natural gas and oil. For us, that was when we moved to Ypsilanti when I was 14 years old.

For Esther, the greatest invention was indoor plumbing. After discussing why she felt this way, I agree that this was probably a more important invention than central heat. My family actually enjoyed indoor plumbing when I was about four years old, so I



Before indoor plumbing this was the typical outhouse consisting of a tiny shed with two or more holes. There was no heat or lighting in these outhouses.

never really went through the experiences that Esther did. She was not able to enjoy indoor plumbing until she was 10. There were two aspects to indoor plumbing. One was the toilet. At first, toilets were several hundred feet from the house. This toilet was called an outhouse and consisted of a tiny shed with a seat with several holes in it of various sizes. There was no light in the outhouse except for that which came through a few vents in the building. In the summer, the place was very hot and had a terrible smell. In the winter, the temperature in the outhouse was the same as the outside temperature. You have to imagine what it was like to sit, bare bottom in a smelly building in ten degree weather. During the time that we used such facilities, there was no toilet paper as we know it today. Instead, paper from other sources, such as a catalogue was used for that purpose. Again, you have to imagine what using that paper was like. Periodically the outhouse had to be moved because the hole beneath it



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was full.

Nighttime was another experience. There was no light in the outhouse. To compensate for not going out at night, the house had pots for use which were called chamber pots, thunder mugs, slop jars or other terms. They were usually pots about 18 inches high which were kept under the bed. It was difficult to sit on them, but it was better than a trip to the outhouse in the dead of night. The next day, these had to be emptied and cleaned.

The other aspect of indoor plumbing was water. At one time, we got our water from a well. The well was located in the yard and had a pump to bring the water to the surface. It was difficult to know what was in the well, but one could often taste such things as sulfur or iron. Since the well was open, it was also difficult to know what else was living or had fallen into the well. Beside the pump was often a container of water. Many times the leather in the pump would shrink, and it was necessary to prime the pump by pouring some water in the top. This swelled the leather and gave the suction necessary to bring the water to the surface.

Water was drawn from the well, placed in a bucket and carried into the house. Some water was used for cooking, some for bathing and some for drinking. The drinking water was in a pail and alongside the pail was a dipper. The pail was not covered and everyone used the dipper to get a drink. It was always a personal decision as to where to drink from the dipper. The idea was to drink where no one else had put their mouth and interestingly, almost everyone thought

that was near the dipper handle.

Later, some of the homes were able to move the pump inside. This was often because houses also had a cistern. The cistern was a concrete container in which rain water was collected. The rain water was "soft" water and was ideal for certain purposes like washing your hair. Also, there was a water reservoir in most cooking



Early technology involved a cistern to collect rain water that could be pumped into the kitchen sink with a hand pump.

stoves. The stoves were heated with wood. While the cooking was going on, the water in the end of the stove was being heated, and this provided warm water for certain uses.

Without indoor plumbing which included a hot water tank, bathing and washing clothes became a particular problem. Washing clothes demanded hot water, and the only way to get hot water was to heat it in a tub. This was a long process. The clothes were put in a tub with hot water and soap. They were agitated by a laundry stick. The dirtiest ones were washed by hand on a wash board. They were then placed in another tub with hot water and rinsed. The clothes were then rung out by hand. These clothes were then hung outside to dry on a clothes line. In the winter, they were

hung in the basement or in other parts of the house. I don't think we ever had a humidity problem during the winter. Hanging the clothes outside was almost an art. There was a technique to hanging the clothes which conserved clothes pins, hung clothes in a certain order and position, and sheltered the unmentionables from the prying eyes of neighbors. In our personal life, Esther did have a wash-

ing machine in our first home. However, she did not have a dryer until we had been married for about ten years.

Now for the bath. A bath took place once a week. This again was because of the difficulty of producing hot water. At one time, the bath was in a metal tub, but later our houses had a bath tub. The bath took place on Saturday night. The water was heated, and then people bathed in the same water in sequence. My Dad was first, followed by my Mother. My sister was next, and I was last. I

think you can imagine how the water looked when it came to be my turn. I never got a hot bath, but the water was usually still warm. Following the bath, we all got clean clothes to wear: underwear, socks, trousers and shirt. Those were the clothes we wore for the week. We did wash our face and hands daily, and sometimes our feet if they were particularly dirty. Laundry day was Monday and that was when everyone's dirty clothes from the past week were washed. Sometimes in the summer, we would all go to the lake. We would take a bar of soap and that is where we would take our weekly bath.

Taking a shower was something quite different. It was a long time before we had a shower in our house. My first shower was when I was in the



third grade. Someone in Flint, the union or the Mott Foundation, advertised that showers would be available to families in a building in downtown Flint. The cost was a nickel. My Mother took my sister and me, along with towels and a bar of Life Buoy soap, to that building on a bus. We had to make a transfer to a second bus to get there.

My next showering event was when I was about eleven. We had traveled to Detroit to visit my Aunt Mina. At that time, Detroit was the "emerald city" of the state. Everyone wished they could live in Detroit. My Aunt Mina, who had changed her name to Margaret, was married to a man named Walter Blank. He was a robust German with a verve for life. He was a salesman, and at one time he sold industrial diamonds. He lived the high life, was very generous, drove a red convertible and drank special Canadian whiskey.

He took me to my first Tiger ball game. He liked the comical and absurd. Once, he took my parents to a fine restaurant. During the dinner, he stood up and snapped his suspenders, and his pants fell to the floor. He was wearing long red underwear. The patrons were mortified, and the manager came to chastise him. As he was explaining what happened, he snapped the suspenders again, and again, his pants fell to the floor. Naturally they were escorted from the restaurant. He did have a lot of idiosyncrasies. One night, while playing cards with my parents, he excused himself to go to the bathroom. After several minutes, they became concerned and went to look for him. He had completely disrobed and gone to bed.

It was at their house that I took my next shower. I was about eleven, and while the adults were playing cards, my Aunt asked if I would like to take a shower. That was a real treat for me. She showed me how to turn on the water and left me in alone the bathroom. I was uncertain as to how to use the shower curtain, but it seemed to me that it should not be on the inside of the tub where it would get all



When indoor plumbing was introduced it involved indoor bath tubs. It was typical for a family to bath in the same water in sequence to save the time and cost of heating the water.

wet and soapy. Therefore, I placed it on the outside. It was not long before the people downstairs knew what I had done. Water started coming down on them through the light fixtures. My shower ended abruptly. After that, the showers I got were at school in junior high gym and in high school gym. At that time, I showered every day.

It is probably true that my generation does not have the proper appreciation for the rapid growth in technology during the past twenty years. I am certain that younger people feel that the old folks do not understand or appreciate all the new technology. My perception is that while the technological changes have allowed people to do more than ever before, it does seem to me that there is a difference

in purpose between the old and the modern technology. The technology which previous generations experienced helped people do necessary things more efficiently. The technology of today seems more organized toward doing things for people with the result that more technology means the loss of more personal abilities. As I see what is happening, young people are losing their ability to spell,

do basic math, write, speak and actually research information. Everything in life is available through some instrument which they hold in their hand. They have the ability to do things like possess one hundred thousand pictures or fifty thousand songs which it is unlikely they will ever use. The new technology seems to be moving personal skills and ability to machines and devices. It does seem that the older technology helped people cope better with life while current technology may be causing younger

people to lose their coping skills. However, I acknowledge that this is only the opinion of an octogenarian and probably contains some degree of bias.

In any event, I do know this. If I had to choose between central heat and indoor plumbing versus wifi, computers, bluetooth, smart phones, On Star, high definition, Sirius, etc., I have no doubt what my choice would be.

*(Dr. Jack Minzey received the Bachelor's Degree from Michigan State Normal College, the Master's Degree from the University of Michigan and the Doctor's Degree from Michigan State University. He worked for Michigan State University, the Michigan Department of Education and finally Eastern Michigan University where he retired in 1992.)*



The left side of the table showing the Ypsilanti Coffee Club in 2011 when they met at Tim Hortons (l to r): Tom Humphries, Joe Butcko, Tom Willoughby, Bob Marsh, Jack McClure, Ken Warner, Rory Carpenter, Harold Britton and Jack Minzey.

The Constitution of the United States of America, as everyone knows, requires that every community of any size have at least one group of men who gather on a regular basis to solve the problems of the world. Ypsilanti is fortunate to have several such groups in the city. Some can be found at the Bomber Restaurant where they meet at least once a month. The premier group in this city is the Ypsilanti Morning Coffee Club, which meets every weekday morning at the Biggby Coffee Shop on Washtenaw Avenue, just west of the campus of Eastern Michigan University.

There, starting at 8:00 am on Monday through Friday, a number of men gather around the tables, set in a line, drinking coffee and discussing the issues of the day. The subjects can be on sports, the weather, politics, power tools, home and car repair and just about anything else. The number of men can range from as few as five or less, to over twenty on any given day. Then at 9:00 am the group plays the "Honest John" game to see who pays for the coffee and the meeting is over. The men then set off, as one member was fond of saying, "like a herd of turtles."

This group of men began meeting in the 1930's, and originally held their meetings in the dining room of the Huron Hotel on Pearl Street. When the group started, the members were businessmen, who ran the shops and stores in the downtown area of Ypsilanti. There were lawyers and other professionals as well.

The men would gather at the table about 8:00 am and carry on the important business of talking and drinking coffee until nine o'clock. At the hour of nine, in the early years, most of the men had to leave to open their businesses. As the years passed, most of the men retired and today the majority of the members are retired.

The group continued to hold their meetings at the Huron Hotel into the 1960's, long after the glory days of the building had passed. Over the years, the group has held its meetings in a number of locations, including The Tower Inn, Tuckers Café, and Tim Horton's on Michigan Avenue. Today the group assembles each Monday thru Friday at Biggby Coffee.



Early in the history of the group, the problem of who would pay for the coffee was solved. Who pays for the coffee is decided by the game of "Honest John." (A word of advice, never trust anyone who tells you they are honest.) A member of the group has the title of "Game Master." He keeps track of the number of members in attendance. The Game Master writes a sentence or phrase with the number of words determined by the number of members sitting at the table. The subject of the sentence or phrase is based on something the members talked about that morning. Each word in the phrase corresponds to five members present. At 9:00 am the game master calls the members to order and announces it is time for the game. The last member to arrive at the gathering begins the game. This member calls out a letter in the alphabet. Then the member sitting next to him calls out the next letter in the alphabet and so on.

When a member calls out a letter that matches the first letter in a word of the phrase, the game masters says; "That's one." Then, when a member calls out a letter of the first letter in another word of the phrase, the game master says; "That's another." This continues until someone has called out all of the first letters of the words in the phrase. Each "winner" pays five dollars to cover the cost of the coffee. No member can lose more than once each day, and no more than twice in the same week.

This group has continued since the 1930's because it welcomes newcomers to the meeting. Still, a prospective member must meet rigorous requirements. He must show up at the meeting and have five dollars. Do you have what it takes?

The following poem was written about the Club by Harold Frances Yates:



The right side of the table showing the Ypsilanti Coffee Club in 2011 when they met at Tim Hortons (r to l): Bill Anhut, Les Heddle, Hassan Marshan, Al Rudisill, Bob Fanslow, Roger Katon, Ellis Freatman, Dan Boughey, Tom Dodd and Charles Soule. (Note: Six of the Club members shown in these 2011 pictures are now deceased.)

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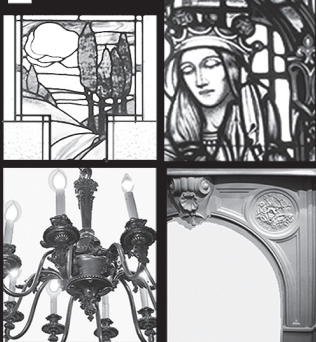
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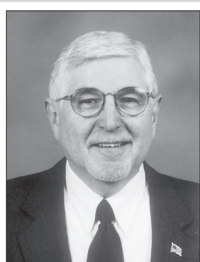


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## THE COFFEE CLUB

*There is a group of fellows,  
I'd say twenty-five or more,  
who gather each weekday morning  
to settle problems by the score.*

*The topics of discussion  
range from sex to the civil war.  
When one problem is addressed  
there are always many more.*

*Most of the fellows are retired,  
being experts all to an extent,  
but now some travel 'round the  
world,*

*with pleasure their intent.*

*They bring back stories of many  
places*

*of sites and side trips taken.*

*Of places of different cultures,  
their love for America unshaken!*

*Local politics are popular,  
and, too, the current news.*

*The discussion of either subject  
evokes the most divergent views.*

*Both conservatives and liberals  
take their respective stands*

*on whether we spend tax money  
at home*

*or help in foreign lands.*

*The sessions are not all serious,  
at times levity abounds*

*because of some funny story*

*of a happening during golf's rounds.*

*Belaboring scores or mis-lined putts,*

*or which driver meets the test.*

*Which all boils down to finding out  
in who's mind their game's the best.*

*Golf is not the only game  
which comes up every day.*

*There is the game of "Honest John"  
that decides who will pay.*

*Some of those who attend, it seems,  
are the luckiest of them all  
for, when the game is finally played,  
they often make the call.*

*In the winter, snowbirds head south  
to avoid the winter's season.*

*But, we the hardy who stay behind,  
are left without good reason.*

*When they return the group expands,  
conversations are so many fold  
that, if you don't listen really well,  
you'll miss all that's being told.*

*(James Mann is a local author and  
historian, a volunteer in the YHS  
Archives, and a regular contributor  
to the Gleanings.)*





# The Great Coat Caper

BY JACK MINZEY

The year was 1937. I was in the fourth grade at Lincoln Elementary in Flint, Michigan. I don't believe that anyone would have thought that public schools had uniforms, but looking back, I believe that at least the boys did. There was a sure sign if you were poor, and there were a lot of children like that in my school. You could tell these kids by two things. One, their hair was long, primarily because their parents could not afford a barber. Second, they wore overalls or as you call them today jeans. And many of those jeans had holes in them. Perhaps you can see why I conjure up a particular impression when today I see boys with long hair and jeans with holes in them.

We were among the poor, but my Mother would never have let anyone get that impression about me. She took odd jobs and did menial tasks to be certain that I was not perceived as a poor kid. We also could not afford a barber, but my Dad had worked out an arrangement with a fellow worker on the assembly line at General Motors to cut my hair at his house. I don't know what financial considerations were in place, all I know is that they joked and shared a beer while I was having my hair cut. The friend had a set of hand clippers that worked by squeezing them. As I remember, they were not too sharp, and they pulled more often than they cut. When my hair cut was finished, I had several bald spots, but as my Dad used to say "there's only a couple of days difference between a good hair cut and a bad one."

As to my clothing, every boy who was perceived as not poor wore a shirt, a cardigan sweater, corduroy knickers, long socks and high top boots. On the side of the right boot was a small pocket which held a jack knife. Imagine that. Every boy in school had a two bladed knife. At recess, we



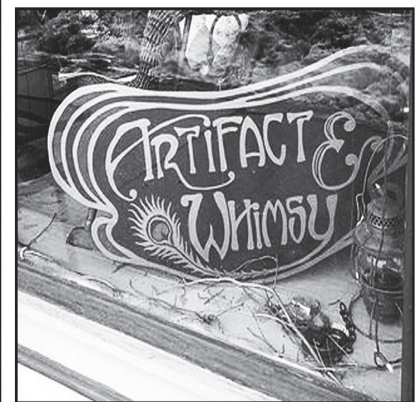
used them to play games. There was "property", "baseball", and "mumblety peg." I don't remember anyone getting in trouble related to their knife.

At the beginning of the year, my Mother had bought me a winter coat at Sears and Roebuck. It was black oil cloth glued onto cheese cloth. It had a fake sheepskin collar. Obviously it was not very expensive, and almost every boy in my class had one. The problem was that the oil cloth did not stick too well and very soon began to peel off and expose the white cheese cloth. When I came home from school one day, my Mother felt that I had gotten the wrong coat because there were several white spots on it. My Mother was a Christian woman who never swore, told off colored jokes, drank or smoked. However, she did feel that someone had taken my coat and she wanted to do something about it. The next morning, she wrote my name on a piece of medical tape. She told me that when I got to school, I should go in the cloak room, identify my coat and put that piece of tape with my name on it in the pocket. Then if someone challenged me about ownership, I could show them my name in the pocket.

The next day I went to school and followed her instructions. I spotted a coat that looked in much better shape than mine, and I put my name

in the pocket. When it came time to go home, I put that coat on. I was tall for my age and taller than all the rest of the boys in my class. When I put the coat on, the sleeves came up just below my elbows, and the bottom of the coat was well above my waist. When I looked at the other boys, Lauren Curnow had on a coat in which the sleeves hung several inches below his hands. We realized that we had on the wrong coats so we swapped.

I don't know if Lauren ever found my name in his pocket. If he did, he is still probably trying to figure out how that could have happened. At any rate, it was a moral lesson that proved that "honesty is the best policy" or that "crime doesn't pay very well.



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Etta Reed died at the age of seven of diabetes at the family home at 224 North Grove Street on November 11, 1917.

# The Tree Stump Memorials at Highland Cemetery

BY JAMES MANN

Highland Cemetery on North River Street in Ypsilanti is a rich garden of gravestone memorials of different styles, shapes and symbols. One of the most distinctive styles are the tree stump memorials that are scattered throughout the grounds of the cemetery. The tree stump memorials were a benefit from the Woodmen of the World, a fraternal benefit society based in Omaha, Nebraska.

Families of the 19<sup>th</sup> century could not afford the inevitable costs of medical care and funeral expenses. To be prepared, at least as far as possible, some families joined fraternal benefit societies, such as the Freemasons, the Odd Fellows and the Knights of Columbus, the forerunners of the present day insurance companies. Some of these societies are still active today. These societies offered financial aid when needed and most had local chapters and held regular meetings as a social outlet. One such society was and is the Woodmen of the World, with the membership benefit of the tree stump memorials if one is willing to pay the extra cost.

The society was founded by Joseph Cullen Root in 1890 after hearing a sermon about, *"Pioneer woodsmen clearing away the forest to provide for their families."* The goal of Root was to start a society that *"...would clear away any problems of financial security for its members."* Membership was open to all and one did not have to work in the lumber industry to join.

An early benefit of the society was the tree stump memorials. These were available to members from 1900 until the late 1920's, when the program was discontinued because of cost. Until then, when a member or a family member died, the pattern of the memorial was sent to a local stone mason who hand carved the monument.

*(James Mann is a local author and researcher, a volunteer in the YHS Archives, and a regular contributor to the Gleanings.)*





The tallest of the tree stump memorials in Highland Cemetery has a planter on top for flowers.



A Woodmen of the World family memorial marker.



Broken branches on a tree stump memorial stands for children of the person who died at a young age.



Symbol of the Woodmen of the World on a memorial marker.





The Ypsilanti Opera House was built in 1879-80 on Congress Street.

# The Ypsilanti OPERA HOUSE

BY JAMES MANN

No city in America was complete in the late 1800's without an opera house. Naturally, Ypsilanti had to have an opera house of its own. That is why, in 1879, the building of an opera house was undertaken. Work on the new building began in 1879 on the site across from the present day public library on Michigan Avenue. The opera house opened in January of 1880 and was an impressive structure.

*"The building was of exceptional tastefulness and beauty for the period. The material was red brick with black brick facings, the structure being surmounted by a dome, and this by ornamental iron work. The interior was of considerable beauty. The ceiling decorations included the medallion portraits of Longfellow, Shakespeare, Tennyson, Byron, Scott, and very properly, in the company of these notables, Ypsilanti's own Professor Frederic Pease,"* noted Colburn in The Story of Ypsilanti.

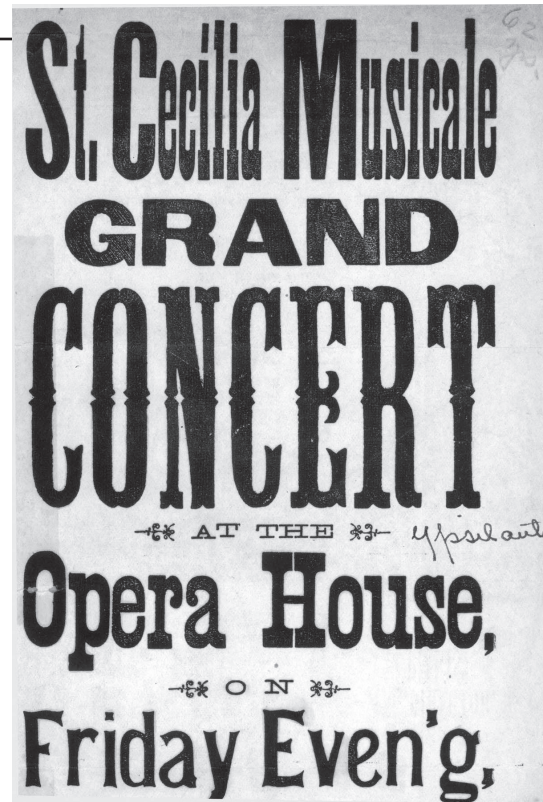
The opera house was soon the center of entertainment in Ypsilanti, hosting traveling theater companies, local amateur productions, operas, public meetings, speakers and civic gatherings. As an opera house, the building was a success when completed. It was considered the finest in the state, but as a commercial enterprise it was not a success. At one point, the investors considered turning



the building into a roller-skating rink. That plan never materialized, however, and the building continued as an opera house until April of 1893.

Just after 7:00 pm of April 12, 1893, a tornado passed through the city of Ypsilanti, demolishing the opera house, and leaving only the front wall standing. Fortunately, no one was in the building at the time, as it is unlikely anyone would have survived. At the time of the disaster, the opera house was owned by a Mr. Draper, who was at home sick at the time. News of the disaster did not improve his health, as he died a few days later. His adult sons had careers outside of the theater, and chose not to rebuild the opera house, but to sell the property. A Mr. Nowlin purchased the property in October of 1894 and the work of clearing away the ruins started soon after.

*"It is a troublesome job to untangle the work of the tornado," noted **The Ypsilanti Commercial** of November 2, 1894, "and to visit the place now makes one shudder to realize what would have been the result if an entertainment had been in progress that night. Every person in the house, except in a small space under the extreme south-east gallery, would have been crushed under tons of brick and broken timbers."*



An 1879 program at the Ypsilanti Opera House.

Photo Courtesy of the Yankee Air Museum

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A view of the damage to the Ypsilanti Opera House that was caused by a tornado on April 12, 1893.

Construction of the new opera house began in the spring of 1895, but was stopped several times because of cash flow problems. The stockholders of the Opera House Association considered dropping the project at least twice, but each time chose to carry on with the project. The new opera house was completed in December of 1896. The new building was smaller and less grand than the old one, but was still an impressive structure. The stage was larger than in the old structure and the arrangements for heat and light were an improvement a well.

Some things did not change. "A strange coincidence in the new and old opera house," reported *The Washtenaw Evening Times* of

Wednesday, December 30, 1896, "*is that the downstairs seating capacity is exactly the same, 472. The arrangement of the seats in the old building was entirely different from that of the present one.*"

The new opera house finally opened on December 31, 1896, but the turnout was a disappointment. "There were plenty of vacant seats," reported *The Washtenaw Evening Times* of Saturday, January 2, 1897, "not over 150 people being present when the curtain arose, but what was lacking in numbers was made up in appreciation by the audience which liberally applauded all the meritorious features."

The week after the opening, the opera house presented the play "Fate."

This appears to have met with greater success, as a local girl ran off and eloped with one of the actors. The opera house became the Wuerth Movie Theater in 1920, and in later years was known for a lack of heat and a surplus of mice. The theater portion of the building was demolished in 1959, for the expansion of a municipal parking lot. The front of the building still stands, and is used for retail space and apartments.

(James Mann is a local historian, a volunteer in the YHS Archives, and a regular contributor to the *Gleanings*.)





Construction of the new Opera House began in the spring of 1895 and was completed in December of 1896.

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 R. U. Thayer—A Constable; "Better late than never".....R. B. Henry  
 Sella de Banan—Every day goes the same.....J. E. Aiken  
 Devlin Kamp—A Disturbing Element; all that his name implies.....S. J. Daniels  
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