

# The Rochester Era

## February 2010 Meeting Features Ski Jump

### Newberry Hill - The Rochester Ski Jump.

Don't miss the next RAHS general meeting at the Rochester Library (7:00 to 8:30). The speaker will be our own Penny Reddish, whose family goes way back to pioneer days in Rochester. She will tell us all the details about Rochester's famous ski jump, the highest ski jump built in the lower peninsula.

Penny has pictures to show, and lots of family records, ski-jump memorabilia, family diary entries, and research about the famous and breath-takingly high ski jump, done by her grandmother.

Penny's family actually sold the land to the people who built that ski jump. (For more information, call Program Chairperson, Jo Ann Bourez, 248-651-7526)

### Brown Bag Lunch Meeting February 3, 2010

Penny Crissman will be the featured speaker. She is currently the Government Relations Director for Crittenton Hospital and has served the area in Lansing as a State Representative and has been a member of the Rochester City Council.

A lifelong resident of Rochester, Penny's family connections were Grey ( her maiden name) and Carpenter. She has spent much of her adult life in public service. Her topic for the Brown Bag Meeting will be "Growing Up in Rochester". She has many stories to share on the subject.



Ski Jump under construction.

Learn more about life in the Rochester area on February 3 (2010) at the Rochester Community House, 12 noon to 1:00. Bring your lunch if you wish. Beverages will be provided. The public is invited, so bring a friend.

For more information call Rod Wilson (248) 651-6178.

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**From the President...**  
**Rod Wilson**

I hope everyone had a happy and festive holiday season. As we move into the second half of our year, I want to thank everyone who has contributed to making the year a success. Thank you, thank you.

Hopefully everyone saw the great ad that appeared in the Community Lifestyles newspaper. It ran for two weeks and promoted the items we have for sale as Christmas gifts. People in the community must have seen it because I received a half dozen calls wanting more information about some of the items.

You may also have noticed the price increase on our Cat's Meow™ buildings. Due to the increase in our cost to have them produced, we have had to increase the cost of all buildings to \$20 each.

We continue to work with the City of Rochester and the Rochester Historical Commission on Bunker Park. Hopefully in the near future we will have some good news to share with everyone.

We have many projects underway. If you want to discuss any of these with me, give me a call, 248-651-6178 or give the project chairperson a call.

**Downtown Walking Tours**

The schedule for the downtown walking tours in 2010 are as follows:

- April 29 - Thursday @ 7:00 p.m.
- May 18 - Tuesday @ 7:00 p.m.
- June 21 - Monday @ 7:00 p.m.
- July 23 - Friday @ 7:00 p.m.
- August 11 - Wednesday @ 7:00 p.m.
- September 19 - Sunday @ 1:00 p.m.
- October 9 - Saturday @ 1:00 p.m.

Why not plan on joining us for one of these walks. There is no charge to RAHS members.

**Home Town Rochester Book**

This is an update of the financial side of our new outstanding book. Home Town Rochester was introduced in November 2008 at a cost of \$10,000. As of November 2009, we have realized income of \$10,000 from the book. We feel very good about breaking even on this book in just a year considering the economy. From here on out all the sales are all profit to our organization. Thank you Deborah Larsen.

**Rochester Community Schools Administration Building Mural**

Included in this newsletter is the history of the mural at the RCS Administration Building and RAHS involvement in its restoration. Hopefully this mural will be hanging again in the Admin. Building. Thank you LaVere Webster and all those that have been involved in this project.

<b>OFFICERS</b>	
President.....	Rod Wilson 248.651.6178
Vice-President.....	Brian Dunphy 248.656.5968
Treasurer.....	Mary Howarth 248.375.0206
Recording Secretary.....	June Hopaluk 248-652-9242
Corresponding Secretary.....	Janet Potton 248.652.7296
Member-at-Large.....	Susan Hohf 248.852.9015
Member-at-Large.....	James Hopkins 248.342.6782
Past President.....	Greg Doyle 248.651.6076
<b>COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS</b>	
Historian.....	Gail Kemler 248.651.0907
Membership.....	Carole Fischer 248.853.0118
ERA.....	Mary Howarth 248.375.0206
Program.....	JoAnn Bourez 248.651.7526
Publicity.....	Liz Golding 248.656.1125

## “Rochester Community Schools Mural Restoration”

**Project :** A partnership between the Rochester-Avon Historical Society and the Rochester Community Schools.

The project to restore the WPA Mural at the Rochester High School Administration Building began in 2007. It came about after eight or so years of Susan Wilson pestering her husband Rod Wilson, president of the Rochester-Avon Historical Society, to just go look at the fantastic mural that hangs over the main door of the old Rochester High School. Susan, a Rochester High School graduate and a 25 year employee of the school system had been to many meetings in a room next to the mural. She had admired the mural while attending school in that building and later continued to admire it every time she climbed the stairs to attend her meetings.

A Works Progress Administration (WPA) program called the Federal Art Project was designed to provide employment to artists, many of whom were without income during the worst years of the Depression. The FAP resulted in the creation of more than 2,500 murals in public buildings, schools, hospitals and civic auditoriums across America. Rochester benefited from this program when two pieces of art were installed in the high school building. The first was a bas relief mural originally commissioned for the school library, but later moved to a corridor, created by sculptor Leonard D. Jungwirth (1903-1964). Jungwirth, later an art professor at Michigan State University, was better known as the creator of MSU's famous “Spartan” statue, unveiled in 1945. His 25-foot long mural, depicting scenes of American labor and education, was installed at Rochester High in 1934. During a renovation of the building in 1990, it was carefully moved to the former gymnasium, to become the focal point of a new meeting room in that space.

An FAP painting entitled “Industrial Environment of Rochester High School” was installed over the central stairwell of the high school building in May, 1938. This 23-foot long oil on canvas mural was the work of Marvin Beerbohm (1909-1981), a well-known muralist who created numerous works for WPA/FAP projects, including a notable one for the Detroit Public Library. FAP artists were encouraged by the government to incorporate elements of local history into their work, and Marvin Beerbohm did so with his Rochester High mural. The figures in the painting were all based on sketches of local people. The central figure, wearing a cap and gown, is former Rochester superintendent of schools Abram L. Craft, who had died a year before the mural was finished. The mural also features scenes of Parkedale Biological Farm on the right side, and Ferry-Morse seed farm on the left.

The Beerbohm mural disappeared from view in 1961, when the school building was remodeled and the central stairwell was removed. At this time, the mural was covered with drywall and forgotten. Workmen were surprised in 1990 to discover the artwork behind a wall while renovating the building yet again. Although damaged, the painting was carefully extracted and once again made available to public view.

In 2007 Rod Wilson visited the RCS Administration Building to view the mural. After Rod and Susan saw all the things that the mural depicted of the Rochester area they

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**Mural** continued from Page 3

enlisted the help of LaVere Webster, a RAHS member and a painting conservator and appraiser, to help us decide if we could handle this important project. In LaVere's words, they asked "Would you go and look at it? Their story intrigued me so I said yes, and met them there. Next, they ask me. Would you restore it? and I said 'yes' not realizing how long this road of restoration was going to stretch or the turns it was going to take. It was at this point the Rochester-Avon Historical Society approved the project to pursue getting the mural restored.

Three pieces of the mural had been removed when it had been uncovered in 1990. The drywall was removed taking the three pieces of the mural with it in the removal process. The remainder of the mural on the wall was reframed. One missing piece has been preserved by Paul Haig. However, the other two missing pieces have not been recovered at this point. Every avenue has been exhausted and not a stone has been left unturned. At this point there has been no success in finding the two missing pieces. The whole right end is still missing.

Through closer inspection of the mural we tried to find who the artist was. We finally found that he had cleverly painted his signature on the paper in the typewriter of a local stenographer. Having talked to researcher and RAHS member Deborah Larsen, we learned that Marvin Beerbohm, the artist, had donated some of his papers to the Smithsonian Institute. Rod and Susan decided to take a trip to Washington to see just what the Institute had. To our astonishment, we found in his box of donated items an 8x10 photograph of Marvin Beerbohm *PAINTING OUR MURAL!* There were also pictures of the mural being hung over the door at the high school. What a find! Now we knew what the missing piece on the right end was. It was of all the beautiful barns at Park Davis Biological Farm.

LaVere Webster proceeded with the cleaning and restoration which took place on a hi-rise furnished by the school maintenance department. After the process of cleaning and restoration while the mural was in place over the doorway, the decision was made that the mural needed to come down and be moved to a different place in the same building. We tried a local contractor who looked and then declined doing the project, as it was glued to the plaster on an outside structural wall and onto a ton of plastered wall which would have to be removed in one piece.

Next he recruited a friend, Bob Dona, who was very skilled with the chainsaw. Two weeks later we had most of it off the wall, with 5 chainsaws plus numerous chains being destroyed during the removal process. We wore face masks and were covered with plaster dust. In the third week of removal, LaVere was joined by John Baranowski with his impact tool. It was taken off in 10 sections being careful not to disturb any of the figures. On the back of each section was over an inch of plaster consisting of 3 layers plus another layer of adhesive (like the kind used to lay floor tile). Six or eight inches of the top of the mural were hidden under drywall construction. In addition, the top of the mural was nailed into the plaster wall under the drywall construction which made removal rather tricky. All in all we lost less than one percent of the painting surface.

The sections of the mural went home with LaVere to be stored in his barn until we could

**Mural** continued on Page 5

**Mural** continued from Page 4

begin the next process of removing 3 layers of plaster on the back side, one layer at a time. The bottom layer separated fairly easily, that is compared to the next two layers which were exceedingly difficult. The bottom layer came off with just the tap, tap, tap of the hammer while holding the section in a vertical position. The middle layer did not work that way at all. LaVere had to experiment with the other two layers since this would be a process unexplored by other conservators and there were no conservation literature as how to do the removal a mural from its plaster.

After several experiments, LaVere found one method that worked quite well, but was very work intensive. Each layer of plaster became more and more difficult to remove. With each layer removed the mural section became more easily handled.

The middle layer of plaster was a more difficult challenge. They placed a section of mural face side down on a very hard surface with one layer of newspaper between. LaVere's major in college chemistry became very helpful to develop the next method to be used. It went this way. From the back side of the mural moisten the plaster several times with water using a sponge, but keep the water off any exposed canvas. Continue this moistening until the plaster is saturated. Then let it set for one to two hours. After the plaster has absorbed the water and softened, use the curved side of a wood rasp to crumble the damp plaster and remove the crumbles. Repeat inch by inch until all the plaster has been removed including the final layer of the white finish plaster. There was a layer of floor tile adhesive remaining which was not removed because it would damage the painting on the front side of the mural.

LaVere was able to recruit and train several RAHS volunteers to finish the removal of the plaster, and showed them how he had learned how to do it. It took several people many, many hours to complete this process. Our thanks go to Jean Kemler-Larkum for removing the layers plaster, and to Penny Reddish, Susan Hohf, Liz Littleton and Susan Wilson for their tireless work sanding the final stage.

At this point the mural is 95% ready to be mounted and suspended in the Harrison Room at the RCS Administration Building. This will be accomplished by:

- a. Building the Hanger wall in the Harrison Room
- b. Re-mounting the sections of the mural onto monocloth or linen pre-primed canvas with Beva 371, a modern museum adhesive which is non-invasive and reversible.
- c. Lift and affix the mural and new canvas and secure onto the hanger.

At the inception of this project, RAHS agreed to cover all the cost for restoration and the school administration would take care of the hanger and the hanging of the mural. Since that time, our country has seen some very difficult economic times. RCS has no funds available to complete this project and has asked the RAHS to help with fund raising.

RAHS with LaVere's work contribution, cost of supplies, and the contribution of the time of other RAHS members, we estimate our contribution to be \$30,000. Frank

**Mural** continued on Page 6





Marvin Beerbohm at work on the mural.

**Mural** continued from Page 5

Rewold and Sons, the company who will be making the hanger and doing the actual hanging of the mural has donated several thousand dollars in work. This project is still in need of \$8,000 to be able to complete it. The school administration recently identified a contribution of \$2,000, leaving us now needing only \$6,000.

**Join the Rochester Avon Historical Society today!**

**Help to keep what is significant...**

**Refurbish what is historic ...**

**Maintain what is well-known.**

- Bi-monthly newsletters
- Monthly meetings with guest speakers
- Downtown Rochester historical walking tours
- Monthly lunchtime talks by long-time area residents

Dues: Individual \$18, Family \$25, Contributor \$35. Mail your check made payable to the Society with your name, address, telephone and email address to:

Rochester Avon Historical Society, P O Box 80783, Rochester, MI 48308-0783.

## Antique Appraisal Day

The 17<sup>th</sup> annual Antique Appraisal Day is scheduled for Sunday, March 7, 2010. It will be at the Rochester Community House from noon to 4:00 pm. We need volunteers to work that day. Many of you will have an opportunity to assist one of our appraisers. Please call JoAnn Bourez (248-651-7526) to sign-up to work. If you attend the February meeting you can catch her then. Put the date on your calendar and start thinking about those antiques you would like to have appraised!

## Research Committee Launched

The new RAHS Research Committee was organized in November and is already hard at work on several projects. The committee was formed to undertake in-depth historical investigations of a variety of subjects of importance to our community. This effort will result in a series of documented studies which will be used for several purposes, including:

- providing support for Michigan Historical Marker applications and/or National Register of Historic Places nominations;
- answering queries about historical topics received by RAHS from local government officials, members of the media, and citizens;
- development of future RAHS programs and publications;
- ongoing public education efforts

Committee members will be visiting libraries, archives and repositories to locate and examine resource material, interviewing individuals who have first-hand knowledge of subjects under study, conducting online research, and writing fully-documented reports on their findings.

The committee is chaired by Debbie Larsen and comprises the following members: Barb Bates, Beatrice Catherino, John Crissman, Ray Henry, June Hopaluk, James Hopkins, Sara Johnson, Gail Kemler, Brandon O'Neil, Janet Potton, Cathy Pouls, Penny Frank Reddish, Rod and Susan Wilson, and Steve Winokur.

For more information, contact Debbie Larsen at [larsend@libcoop.net](mailto:larsend@libcoop.net) or 248-375-2974.

## Volunteer sign-up for Great Everything Sale

RAHS members help for a few hours with the Great Everything Sale at Rochester Community House in exchange for the free use of a meeting room there once a month for our Brown Bag Lunch meeting. Rochester Community House also gives us the free use of Rooms A & B for our yearly Appraisal Day.

If you haven't already signed up and would like to volunteer to help sort items for the Great Everything Sale, call Jo Ann Bourez, 248-651-7526.

## ORAL HISTORY RECEPTION

On Sunday, April 18, 2010, a reception will be held at the Rochester Hills Public Library, from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. Plans are underway to invite all of the interviewees, their families and friends, as well as the membership of the RAHS and OTHS. The event will be open to the public. Please note this date on your calendar and plan to come and learn about completed oral histories and how you can enjoy them in the future.

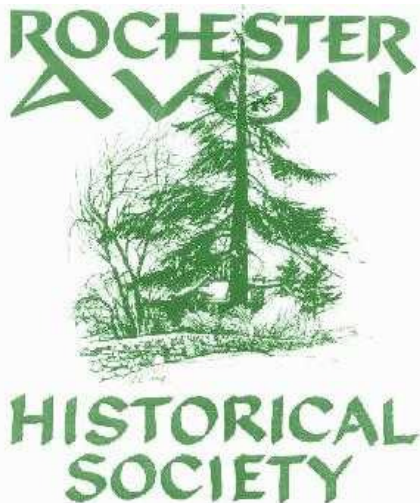
### Have you seen the restored Twin Pines Dairy Truck?

If you missed it at the Rochester Area Heritage Festival, you may want to go to [http://detroitkidshow.com/twin\\_pines\\_truck.htm](http://detroitkidshow.com/twin_pines_truck.htm) for a trip down memory lane. It will make you smile!



(Click on photo to see larger version)

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Rochester Avon Historical Society  
Box 80783  
Rochester, MI 48309-0783

*Pride in  
Preserving  
the Past*