

RELIVING

The Rochester Era

November/December

The Rochester-Avon Historical Society Newsletter

2011

Michigan in the Civil War — Don't Miss It!

Jack Dempsey, author and historian, will be the speaker at RAHS Thursday, November 3, evening meeting at Rochester Hills Public Library 7-8:30 pm. Dempsey is a former assistant attorney general for the State of Michigan and is currently the chairman of the Michigan Sesquicentennial Committee.



He is the author of **Michigan and The Civil War: A Great and Bloody Sacrifice**, (Michigan History Press, Feb. 2, 2011, 187 pages). The book includes “thorough and new research,” highlighting the Civil War contributions of the Great Lakes and Michigan. While many books have been written about the Civil War, Michigan is often summed up

in too few words. Over 90,000 Michigan men (and several women) served in the war. Many people do not know that Michigan had a Black Regiment or that Native Americans also served. The Civil War is thought to have been a turning point in Michigan industry and in Great Lakes shipping. Dempsey's presentation should have something for us all.

Could the Hills Theatre Once More be Our Stairway to the Stars?

For the past few years we have talked about the possibility of transforming the old Hills Theatre building, currently the Rochester Plaza, into a specialty theatre in downtown Rochester? Is it possible? We are having a first meeting of interested parties at the Wilson's, Nov. 22nd at 7 pm; phone Rod Wilson at 248-651-6178, to get things going.

Mt. Avon Cemetery Tour 2012 - Join the Planning Fun

During calendar year 2012, probably late summer or early fall, we would like to host a Cemetery Tour in Mount Avon Cemetery. There are Revolutionary War, War of 1812 and Civil War veterans plus many community dignitaries buried in that cemetery. The idea is to have members in period dress tell stories of those who lived in Rochester years ago. This takes a lot of planning and preparation. Debbie Larsen has volunteered to write up the

necessary scripts. To kick off this committee, we are meeting at the Wilson's on Tuesday, March 8 at 7:00 p.m. That following Saturday, March 12, we will meet at the Cemetery to walk the grounds and determine the graves to put on the tour. Our plans at this time are to charge for the tour and have this as a fund raiser for RAHS. If you are interested in being involved in this committee, please contact Rod at 248-651-6178.



Field Trip into the Past

The Packard Proving Ground field trip for RAHS took place on Sat, Oct. 15th, a day of sweeping cold-front winds and intermittent rain. Not a problem. Our tour guide, Proving Grounds Manager, Bruce Webster, led us through the test bay areas, mechanics area, and the facility where tanks and engines were tested.

Once the proving ground was home to state of the art testing technology; the focus of the proving ground was performance and durability. New vehicles were put through strenuous and detailed trials. The tests and procedures had to be developed — a real challenge of engineering and creativity.

Above is a **1928 Packard Phaeton**, fully restored to its original wonder, a roadworthy dream in a time just before the Great Depression curtailed great luxury and before WWII shifted engineering attention to military vehicles.

You too can visit and arrange to be greeted: Call Proving Grounds Manager, Bruce Webster to plan your visit: (586) 739-4800. The Packard Proving Grounds, is a project of The Packard Motor Car Foundation.
<http://www.packardmotorfdn.org/projects.htm>

Photo by Cary Downer, RAHS Board Member

Vehicle Specs

1928 Packard 443 Phaeton,
 8 Cylinders
 Wire wheels and fender spot
 lights optional. Designed in 1927
 in advance of 1928 release.

OFFICERS

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 Hofh
 248.852.9015
 Member-at-Large.....James Hopkins
 248.254-2520
 Past President.....Greg Doyle
 248.651.6076

COMMITTEE CHAIRPERSONS

Historian.....Gail Kemler
 248-651.0907
 Membership.....Carole Fischer
 248.853.0118
 ERA.....Bea Catherino
 248.375-08086
 Program.....Cary Downer
 248-652-1854
 Publicity.....Liz Golding
 248.656.1125
 Publicity Assistant.....Bea Catherino
 248—75-0808

Adventures of LaVere Webster and The Beerbohm Mural: The Journey of Trespure Lost, Found, and Restored

Art Conservator, LaVere Webster, spent the better part of two years restoring a mural that once greeted everyone at Rochester's Harrison Elementary and Rochester High School as they accessed the grand central staircase down to the lunchroom and gym or up to the second floor of the high school building. In those days, both schools were connected. It was a very large mural, done in a style that we might later connect with the Diego Rivera mural at the Detroit Institute of Arts when our high school art class made its annual pilgrimage to the big city. Our mural was special, but time and chance happeneth to us all—even to murals. New schools were built, the old school became a school administrative center—and the Beerbohm Mural was covered over—although, not destroyed.

It was found years later during yet another remodeling effort—where it always had been—with its back to University Drive (once Fifth Street), and its front high on the landing wall, facing the central stairs. It was in bad shape, two large pieces of the canvas were missing, much of it was damaged, but it had survived. Not quite as intact as it once

had been, but still impressive. It was perhaps “saved” by neglect and a layer of plaster board. Now what? Restoration is expensive, difficult, and complexified by the size of the project.

And that will be the tale that LaVere Webster tells us as the mural left the “now what” state to becoming an object of nostalgia, an example of WPA workmanship, and the US Federal Government Art Project job that helped Detroit artist Marvin Beerbohm keep working during the Great Depression.

As with much art, the Beerbohm mural is symbolic of the times, perhaps even of these times. Come to the Rochester Hills Public Library, December 1, 7 pm and LaVere will tell us the story of the mural's rescue; a 23 ft/ x 57 in. mural comes with its own set of needs and it became—well, demanding and near impossible. This has been one of the

L-R: Jim Hopkins, Jim Wilson, and LaVere Webster — assembly of mural Sections

Announcing!!

**Oakland Township
Historical Society -
Antique Appraisal Day
Sunday, Nov. 13, 2011
Noon to 4 pm
Rochester Community
House—816 Ludlow
Call (248) 651-1849 or
248) 651-7991 for further
information.**



Explore Genealogy Research: Join Us

By Carole Fischer

Learn how to trace ancestry, keep track of your research, and create genealogy charts! Each year, resources become easier to find, to read, and to manage. It is fascinating to hear the stories of others and to discover and connect stories of your own.

This year is especially exciting as the 1940s census will become available to the public on April 2, 2012. The 16th US Census was taken on April 1, 1940 during the Great Depression and before US entry into WWII.

The 1940 census asked a number of new questions, including where people were five years before, highest educational grade achieved, and information about wages. One out of 20 people were asked additional questions for census sampling; perhaps your ancestor was one of those.

Now is a good time to get acquainted with internet genealogy research, well in advance of April 2, 2012.

The Internet Genealogy Group, sponsored by RAHS will meet on Nov. 20th, 1-3 pm at the Rochester Hills Public Library, (2nd floor conference room, east at the top

of the stairs). No meeting in December, then meetings January through May. There is no charge and meetings are free and open to everyone.

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Oral History Project Could Use Your Help!

By Janet Potton

Gathering local oral histories is an ongoing project of RAHS. This group has been interviewing, recording, and creating an archive of audio Rochester/Avon memories and stories. It is a public service project that is extremely rewarding. The Oral History Committee would gladly welcome you as an interviewer.

No experience is necessary. The committee will assist you by providing recording equipment and will suggest ways to open the “conversation” and to help people share their histories and remembrances.

This is a delightful and easy way to make new friends, to reacquaint, and to participate in local history.

The next meeting is Saturday, November 19th at 9 a.m. in Rochester Hills Museum Dairy Barn in Stony Creek Village.

If you have any questions, please contact Janet Potton at 248.652-7296.

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Rochester-Avon Historic Sites Go Online

By Jim Hopkins

The Oakland Regional Historic Sites, is live and looking great!! This is an online map of our area with tags for various historical sites; once into the map, click on the tags to see a history for the location.

Since the site came online, other Historical Societies in Oakland and Macomb Counties have started contacting us to join. Our vision for the site is to add neighboring historical properties and continue to grow.

It is our wish that schools, colleges, citizens, and governmental agencies will use the site to learn more about the important history preserved in historical properties and locations.

So far, the response has been very enthusiastic. Click on the live link below or visit the Rochester Avon Historical Society website and click on the link there. <http://oaklandregionalhistoricsites.org/>

Vanished Rochester: The Danish Old People's Home by **Deborah J. Larsen**



The stately old home that stood atop the bluff at the corner of Walton and Brewster roads was known as the Danish Old People's Home from 1949 to 1973. The property on which the house stood was owned for the last half of the 19th century by Oliver Hazard Perry Griggs and his wife Lovina Kelly Griggs, who migrated to Avon Township from Wyoming County, New York in 1865. Griggs farmed the land and reared his children there but moved to the village of Rochester in his later years. The farm then passed into the hands of his son, Charles K. Griggs, owner and operator of the Rochester Elevator. C. K. Griggs continued to operate the farm but did not reside there - he had a handsome home in the village of Rochester as well.

In January 1915, C. K. Griggs sold the farm at Walton and Brewster, consisting at that time of 210 acres, to Pontiac farmer Arthur M. Butler for the sum of \$21,000. Butler lived on the farm until the death of his wife, then sold it in October 1939 to Herbert M. Bray, an executive with the Ajax Steel & Forge Company of Detroit. Herbert Bray died in 1945 and in May 1948, his widow, Violet, sold the estate which the Brays had called "Diane Acres" to the Detroit Lodge of the Danish Brotherhood in America for use as a retirement home for Danish Americans. Extensive additions and renovations were planned to the house to make it suitable for its new purpose.

Home in Avon Township. In 1962, a memorial garden and fountain were added to the property in honor of all Danish immigrants to America who had located in the Detroit area. The fountain was the work of renowned sculptor Marshall Fredericks. It featured a bronze swan in flight, and was entitled "Nordic Swan and Ugly Duckling." Count Knuth-Winterfeldt, at the time the Royal Danish Ambassador to the United States, visited the Danish Old People's Home to formally dedicate the garden and fountain.

In early 1973, the Danish Brotherhood announced the closing of the Danish Old People's Home because the society did not have the funds to complete an expensive array of necessary repairs and upgrades to the property. The twenty residents at the home were moved to other facilities, and the home closed on April 30 of that year. Soon thereafter, Lutheran Social Services of Michigan began plans for a modern senior living community at the location, and the old house was razed when construction of the new facility began.

Danish Village was opened to residents in 1980. The memorial garden and fountain with the Marshall Fredericks sculpture were retained and are still a prominent feature of the property today.

This postcard view of the Danish Old People's Home is from the collection of Rod and Susan Wilson.

Join the Rochester Avon Historical Society today!

Bi-monthly newsletters-monthly meetings with guest speakers-downtown Rochester historical walking tours-monthly lunchtime talks by long-time area residents-oral history projects-book projects-research projects-and much more!

Rochester Avon Historical Society Membership Application

_____New _____Renewal

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone: _____ E-mail Address: _____

_____ \$10 Student _____ \$18.00 Individual _____ \$25.00 Family _____ \$35.00 Contributing
 _____ \$75.00 Institution _____ \$250.00 Patron

Areas of Interest – How would you like to participate?

_____ Historic Research _____ Genealogy Research _____ Special Project Volunteer
 _____ Antique Appraisal Day _____ Annual Picnic _____ Oral History _____ Historic Walking Tour
 Guide _____ Fundraising _____ Heritage Days _____ Sidewalk Sales _____ Refreshments at Meetings
 _____ Publications _____ Other _____

President's Corner . . .

From Rod Wilson

Congratulations to all the members of the Rochester-Avon Historical Society for being selected the Outstanding Local Society by the Historical Society of Michigan. This award is well deserved and is verification that we are one of the best societies in Michigan. Your continued support for all the things we do and all the work that is done by the Board of Directors is what has made this all possible.

Thank you to everyone for their support as I was honored by the Historical Society of Michigan with the Distinguished Volunteer Service Award. This award was made possible by the many years of help and support from my wife. Susan, thank you. All the fun, support and enjoyment of the RAHS membership have also played a big role in my involvement over the years. It is still hard for me to believe that I was honored with this Award for doing something I enjoy so much and have so much fun. Thank you to everyone.

We continue to have many projects in progress. Thank you to those involved in those projects. A special thank you to Jim Hopkins for all his work in getting our newest website OaklandRegionalHistoricSites.com operational. This website is receiving a lot of accolades. If you want to be part of one of these projects or if you have any idea for a project, please call me or one of your Board members.



L-R: Rod Wilson, Janet Potton and Susan Wilson at Traverse City Awards Ceremony

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Cat's Meow— Discontinued

Since 2002, RAHS has had 29 different buildings produced as part of the Cat's Meow Buildings by F.J. Designs in Wooster, Ohio. They have been a very successful fund raiser for our Society. Sales have dropped off and your Board has decided not to have any more of the building produced and to liquidate the inventory we have on hand. Price is being reduced from \$20 each to \$15. Now is the time to complete your collection or give one of the buildings as a Christmas gift.

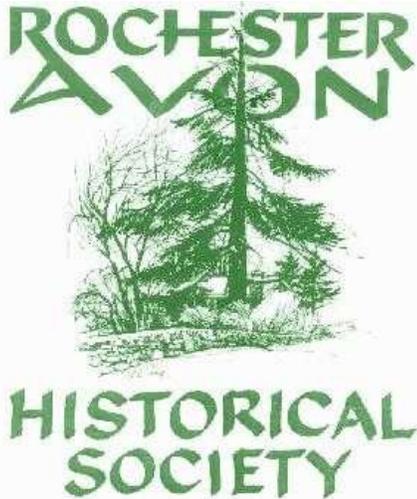
Thank you to Cathy Pouls for being the chairperson the last couple years and to Susan Wilson for her guidance in getting this project started and her leadership over the first half dozen years. Thank you to several committee members who over the years helped make this project successful: Greg Doyle, Liz Golding, Sue Hohf, Gail Kemler, Penny Reddish, Marilee Townsend and Arlene Wilkins.

Artifacts . . .

Receive The Rochester Era online to save delivery time and postage — see our photos in full color and access the live links to online sites. Phone Bea Catherino, ERA Editor 248.375-0808, or email to bvcather@oaklandcc.edu

Rochester Christmas Parade 1950s . . .

We were satisfied with the big red plastic bells that hung over Main Street. The lamp posts were decorated with wooden posters in holiday themes, made by students in Roland Semble's art class at Old Rochester High School (we reused them for many years. The wind roared down Main Street, driving pellets of snow before it — but you know, we were perfectly thrilled!



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

*Pride in
Preserving
the Past*