

History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

December 2010

Judge Whitbeck Book Launch and Signing

On Wednesday, December 1, HSGL members joined members of both the history and legal community to mark the launch of Michigan Appeals Court Judge William Whitbeck's first novel, *To Account for Murder*. The novel is set during the 1945 killing and murder trial of Michigan State Senator Warren Hooper of Albion, one of Michigan's most notorious 20th century political crimes.

Approximately 200 guests attended the event, held at the Michigan Historical Center. Among those there were many current and former state officials and office holders, including members of the State Supreme Court. The evening began with a talk by Judge Whitbeck, and concluded with him signing copies of his book, available for purchase at the event. For those of you who missed the event, you will have another opportunity to meet the judge and purchase his book. He will speak at our January 20th, 2011 meeting, when he discusses the historical research he conducted while writing the novel. Copies of the novel will be available for purchase and signing.



Silver Bells Window Display

Be sure to visit our traditional old fashioned Christmas window display in the Knapp's corner window. This year's displays include a glimpse into Santa's workshop, where the elves are hard at work, and a 19th-century scene of St. Nicholas and Krampus visiting a German home. For those of you who were lucky enough to never be visited by him, Krampus is a mythical counterpart to St. Nicholas who visits the homes of children in Germany, Austria, Croatia, Slovakia, Slovenia, and parts of Italy at Christmas time. Krampus is traditionally represented as a demon who punishes bad children by bringing them birch switches. Some images of Krampus show him carrying a large basket in which he will carry away the bad children from their homes.

The displays are from the collection of MSU museum curator and Christmas collector extraordinaire Val Barryman, who has graciously partnered with the Historical Society of Greater Lansing for the past few years to create these popular displays. This year's display will be up through the holiday season.

Upcoming Events

Our next meeting will take place on Thursday, January 20 at 7:00 pm at the downtown branch of the Capitol Area District Library. Judge William C. Whitbeck will speak on the research he conducted for his new novel, *An Account for Murder*. Copies of his book will be available for purchase and signing at the meeting's conclusion.

Please mark your calendars for Saturday, February 26, 2011, when the Historical Society of Greater Lansing and the Capital Area District Library will co-host the annual African-American History Showcase. Wayne State University Assistant Professor of History Danielle McGuire will speak on the experience of African-American women during the Civil Rights Movement.

Other Historical Happenings

The Lansing Area African American Genealogical Society and the Fred Hart Williams Genealogical Society are co-hosting a presentation by Bryan and Shannon Prince of Ontario called *The Crosswhite Case*. The event is open to the public, and will take place on Saturday, January 8, 2011 from 10:00am to noon at the Library of Michigan, 702 W. Kalamazoo Street, Lansing.

Historic Lansing Images

Many of you have commented on the new design of the History Explorer and asked questions about the location of the images found on the front page banner. For those of you who are curious, the images are (left to right):



- The Brenke Fish Ladder
- The AT&T Building, Downtown
- The Eckert Power Plant
- Water Gauges at the Dye Water Plant
- Walnut Street School, Old Town

The President's Corner

Since joining the historical society a few years ago through a gift membership, I've been amazed at the diversity of the historical knowledge base of many of our society members. It never ceases to amaze me that we have, within our midst, people interested in topics as diverse as politics to architecture, automobiles to geography, wars to fashion, and even the odd bit of outhouse trash! As a board, we try to make sure that our programming every year reflects that same diversity. There are other ways, though, that our individual stories and knowledge can be shared, including through the newsletter!

As a part of our regular newsletter layout, I would like to include a column by a society member – *any society member* – who would like to share a story or a little research on something interesting from Lansing's past. We welcome any and all appropriate topics. Ideas for these member columns include a brief biographical sketch of a Lansing founder, a short history of a local landmark building, the reproduction of a letter that reveals information about old Lansing, or a write-up on a bit of personal Lansing research. If you have questions about whether or not your topic is appropriate, please ask!

Please don't feel that your member column has to be formal – no footnotes required! We're asking for between 600 and 800 words per column. As newsletter editors, we reserve the right to do any editing and polishing required. I also cannot guarantee that all columns submitted will indeed be published.

I sincerely look forward to learning many new things about Lansing's interesting past through your member column contributions. Questions, suggestions, and future column submissions should be directed to me. You can reach me via the phone at 517-282-0671 or by e-mail at vrmarvin@sbcglobal.net. If you prefer to send me a column by mail, please send it to:

Valerie Marvin, 604 W. Lapeer, Lansing, MI 48933

Best –

Valerie Marvin

President, Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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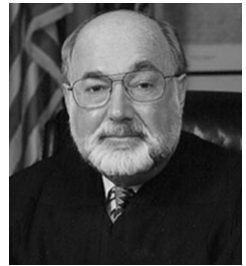
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Interview with Judge William Whitbeck

On Thursday, January 20th at 7:30 pm at the downtown CADL branch, Judge William Whitbeck of the Michigan Appeals Court will give a talk for the HSGL on his research regarding the Warren Hooper murder and the writing of his new novel, *An Account for Murder*. In preparation for the event, Richard Hathaway, HSGL Vice President, sat down with Whitbeck to ask him some questions about the case and his writing. The following text is the product of that interview.

HSGL: Could you provide a background sketch of the Senator Hooper murder events for our members?

Judge Whitbeck: Warren G. Hooper was a perfectly ordinary looking man with a long, gently rounded face, a high forehead, pursed lips, and eyes as bright and vacant as black buttons. He had served without any particular distinction in the Michigan House of Representatives during World War II and then won a State Senate seat in 1944, probably because voters believed he was related to a well-known congressman.



Hooper did have one interesting feature. He was a crook. But in wartime Michigan that did not set him apart from many of his colleagues in the Legislature. A good number of them were also crooks. So many, in fact, that a one-man grand jury, with Ingham Circuit Court Judge Leland Carr as the one-man grand juror and flamboyant trial lawyer Kim Sigler as the special prosecutor, was busily at work interrogating witnesses, issuing subpoenas, returning indictments, and generally threatening Lansing's cozy culture of corruption.

Hooper knew all about the grand jury. After Carr granted him immunity, Hooper had sung in private like the proverbial canary. He was scheduled to testify against Frank D. McKay and to assert that McKay was the central figure in a long-running bribery scheme involving a number of state legislators.

McKay was a legend in Michigan politics. A former state treasurer, he had grown rich on the public payroll and, although he had broken with Governor Harry Kelly, he was still a power in the state's Republican Party. He was known simply as the Boss. And the Boss dealt very directly with his enemies.

Hooper found this out the hard way. After leaving the Capitol on the bitterly cold afternoon of Thursday, January 11, 1945, he drove eastward toward his Albion-area home. On a lonely stretch of M-99, his green Mercury was forced off the highway. Then he was shot and killed, execution-style, and left sprawled in the passenger seat of his burning car.

The killing set off a firestorm. Suddenly, Leland Carr and Kim Sigler were big news and they used their power with a vengeance. Although McKay almost certainly ordered Hooper's death, they were unable to convict him. But they did send members of the infamous Purple Gang—the mob responsible for over 500 murders in Detroit alone before the

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Interview with Judge Whitbeck, Continued from Page 2

Sicilians muscled them out—to prison for the conspiracy to kill Hooper. Concurrently, the grand jury investigation mushroomed. In total, there were 62 convictions, including a former lieutenant governor, 23 state legislators, and more than 30 other lobbyists, police, and court officials. At one time, a third of the Legislature was under indictment. And within two years, Carr was a Supreme Court Justice and Sigler was governor of Michigan.

So, that cold winter day changed Lansing—and Michigan—forever. Although Sigler served only one term as governor, he set the reform locomotive in motion. And the man who defeated him in 1948, G. Mennen “Soapy” Williams, drove that locomotive relentlessly, and honestly, forward for years, as did most of his successors. Ironically, ordinary-looking, button-eyed, venal Warren G. Hooper, through his death, was the man who cleaned up the Capitol.

HSGL: Why were you attracted to this affair for your novel?

Judge Whitbeck: The combination of corruption, politics, and murder was simply irresistible. Because of its sheer drama, it was blazing headlines in Michigan in the early post-war years. In fact, in 1945 Ken McCormick of *The Detroit Free Press* won the Pulitzer Prize for public service for reporting on the Hooper murder, the Carr grand jury, and bribery and corruption involving state lawmakers. Further, the results—the indictments, the convictions, Carr’s ascent to the Supreme Court, Sigler’s election as governor—were spectacular. And the fact that this all took place during a time of great political, economic, and social change in our country and our state made the affair even more attractive. Finally, the story behind the story—the what ifs that come immediately to mind—provided me with an opportunity to create milieu in which, as protagonist/narrator says at the outset, everybody lies and things are rarely as they seem.

HSGL: How would you describe your book, history, fiction inspired by, derived from, based upon, loosely based on or?

Judge Whitbeck: *To Account for Murder* is only very loosely based on the real events. I set out to write a novel, not a historical account, and every character who has a speaking role in the book is entirely fictional. For example, the special prosecutor for the one-man grand juror, Hubbell Street, is totally unlike Kim Sigler. In fact, the person that I had in mind when I created the character was Lyndon Johnson . . . large, intimidating, ambitious, relentless, folksy at times but deadly serious at his core and totally without scruple in his methods.

The protagonist/narrator in the book, Charlie Cahill, is equally fictional and without any counterpart in the real life. I made Cahill a man haunted by loss. He has lost his belief in the great game of the law, a game that is fixed from the beginning. He lost his father, who drowned during Prohibition smuggling whiskey across the Detroit River. He lost his left arm below the elbow to German machine-gun fire on D Day. And he may lose the one thing that still matters to him, the woman who rescued him from his own despair.

That woman is Sarah Maynard. She has chestnut hair with a single white streak, a wicked laugh, a thirst for love, and a corrupt state senator for a husband. With the probe into corruption at the state capital about to begin, the police find the

senator dead in the middle of a cornfield. Cahill is not surprised. As he says in the opening chapter of *To Account for Murder* “I knew nothing about an investigation. But I knew all about the senator. After all, I’d shot him.”

Rather obviously, this is light years away from the real events and those events provided me with only a base upon which I constructed a fictional alternative universe, one in my objective was to weave a story about what might have been, not what was.

HSGL: Why not a straight historical account?

Judge Whitbeck: First, the straight historical account had already been written. Authors Bruce A. Rubenstein and Lawrence E. Ziewacz wrote *Three Bullets Sealed His Lips* in 1987 and, along with Ken McCormick’s newspaper stories, this remains the most authoritative historical account of the Hooper affair. Second, I was taken with the idea of writing fiction. When I was in college at Northwestern University’s Medill School of Journalism, I was trained in straight reporting and expository writing but I dreamed of writing the great American novel. Despite a long career as a lawyer and a judge, that dream has never really left me. *To Account for Murder* is a genre novel—a legal thriller—but it allowed me to accomplish a least some small portion of that dream. Third, I love reading history, but I am not sure I would like to write it.

HSGL: Did you research the events before writing; what were the resources you used in your research?

Judge Whitbeck: Yes, I did extensive research. The Rubenstein and Ziewacz book was a good starting place, but I found the most valuable resources were the newspapers of the era. The Library of Michigan has microfiche copies of every major newspaper in the state and I spent hours there in the early evenings and on Saturday, reading the post-war stories themselves but also picking up the atmosphere of the era, the cost of clothing and coffee and cars, they way people spoke and wrote, the popular movies and songs of the time, the tone of political and legal discourse, the social events, and the public attitudes. It was a fascinating experience and I am grateful that such valuable resources were so readily available to me.

HSGL: Besides the practically obvious ones for a novelist, what are your hopes for the book? Any ethical or moral lessons you want to impart? Or is writing a darn good story enough?

Judge Whitbeck: The message I wanted to impart, the lesson if you will, is one of hope. *To Account for Murder* is a gritty, sometimes graphic take on postwar politics and the legal system. The language is direct and certainly not politically correct. Many of the characters are—using the term broadly—corrupt. Charlie Cahill, the narrator/protagonist, carries a number of scars, both physical and emotional. And he is a heavy drinker who falls in love with a married woman. He is also complicit in the murder that is at the center of the book, a fact that, as I noted, he admits in the first chapter.

But, for all of that, Cahill has the strength to persevere and ultimately to overcome, at least partially, both his own limitations and the circumstances in which he finds himself. As he says in the last chapter, no one is pure in this life. But, he says, you have to live your life anyway, as best you can. For all its qualifications and ambiguity, that is a message of hope, loyalty, and love.



Historical Society of Greater Lansing
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