



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

March 2011

Specters of Lansing's Old Town

By Prof. David Stowe

How did North Lansing become "Old Town"? What circumstances made it possible for a nondescript neighborhood known for barroom brawls and boarded-up buildings to transform itself into a local magnet for arts and culture? What was gained--and lost--for the residents of North Lansing?

These are questions that animated a group of graduate students in MSU's American Studies Program to create a 30-minute documentary film titled "Specters of Lansing." During the spring semester of 2009 nine students worked together to explore North Lansing and film interviews with artists, businesspeople and residents, getting a range of personal stories and perspectives on the transformation of the neighborhood. Working with MSU faculty members David Stowe, Ann Larabee, and others, they learned how the neighborhood evolved from its early roots as a lumber mill settlement through its industrial period and painful deindustrial decline after World War II, to a kind of cultural renaissance beginning in the late Seventies.

Armed with recent scholarship on urban sociology and the developing field of public humanities, the students went into the project expecting to find a tale of gentrification: low-income residents of color pushed out by yuppie artists in search of cheap rents and bohemian urban grit. What they found was a much more complicated story.

In addition to producing "Specters of Lansing," the students collaborated with graduate students in the Theater Department who used the freshly gathered oral

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Potter Park Zoo Feline/Primate House

formerly Lion House - 1930

The following Lansing landmark profile is an excerpt from the upcoming publication by Lansing artist Vic Nelhiebel in partnership with the Historical Society of Greater Lansing.

A bear, two raccoons, and herds of deer and elk were residents of Michigan's first public zoological park. In 1920 these animals were transferred to Lansing's Potter Park from other locations around the City. The first Zoo building, the Bird and Reptile House, was constructed in 1929. Based on Zoo building designs of the era, and likely inspired by the similar 1927 Toledo Zoo Carnivore Building, the Lion House was constructed in 1930.

Constructed of brick and masonry with a long central corridor, the east and west ends were public entrance porticos with peaked roofs sided by brick columns. Above these entrances were large half-round windows accented by decorative brick patterns and a masonry keystone. On the north and south sides of the exterior were barred cages topped and sided with brick. The interior of the building had stark, plain masonry walls and a concrete floor. Barred cages lined the corridor, with doors to the outside cages. The windows above the entrances provided some interior natural light.

The Lansing State Journal in a Jan. 1, 1931 article praised the new building saying that "No attempt has been made to add the artificial surroundings with which so many zoological buildings are afflicted, the one moving factor being to build a substantial building in which animals could be kept properly and where the

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The President's Corner

For most of us who live in Michigan, the promise of spring is what keeps us going this time of year. Spring means flowers, bird songs, and green grass. It means no more snow shoveling, no more icy roads, and no more sub-zero temperatures. Spring is, in many ways, the earth's way of reminding us that our hope for better things will indeed be rewarded!

Yet 150 years ago, though, the spring that dawned in Michigan was not so hopeful. Instead of warm days and the bounty of summer, that spring promised only darkness and war. That April, our nation was shaken by the beginning of America's greatest and deadliest war, the Civil War, which still divides and unites our country today.

Like many historical groups, the Historical Society of Greater Lansing will mark the sesquicentennial of the Civil War throughout the next four years. As a part of our celebrations and commemorations, we will have at least one Civil War focused program each year. Our first such event, a talk by retired state capitol historian Kerry Charkoff, will take place in May. Charkoff will speak on the career of Austin Blair, Michigan's Civil War Governor, who held the State's top office from 1861 - 1864. More information about this event will be in the May newsletter.

We also encourage our members to participate in some of the many other local and statewide Civil War commemorations that have already begun to take place. For more information on these, please visit the official state website for Civil War commemorations and events: www.seekingmichigan.org/civil-war.

Best –

Valerie Marwin

President, Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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African American Family History Showcase

The 2011 African American Family History Showcase was well received. Held on February 26th in the galleries of the Downtown Branch of Capital Area District Library several organizations set up table top displays. Some participants were the local Juneteenth organizers, the New Citizen's Press and Sigma Gamma Rho sorority. There were exhibits featuring the history of local African American families as well as African American contributions to the armed forces. Special exhibits featured the theme of this year's Black History month, the Civil War.

The speaker was Wayne State University Assistant Professor of History Danielle McGuire. She presented on her 2010 publication *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Race and Resistance - A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power*. The crowd enthusiastically asked many questions and kept her later than expected.

Upcoming Events

On Thursday, March 17 at 7:00 pm the Historical Society of Greater Lansing will welcome MSU Professor David Stowe and some of his students, who will present a documentary they wrote and produced titled *The Specter of Old Town*. The film covers such issues as the history of Old Town, as well as its modern development as an artists' neighborhood and the increasing gentrification of the area. The event will take place at the downtown branch of the Capitol Area District Library.

In April the Historical Society of Greater Lansing will host a talk by railroad enthusiast Norm Kessler on the history of the old Lansing-Jackson Interurban Line, which was part of the Michigan United Railway. Norm is an active volunteer for the Illinois Railway Museum, located in Union, Illinois, where he spends a great deal of time restoring old electric railroad cars. Norm will speak on Thursday evening, April 21, at 7:00 pm at the downtown branch of the Capitol Area District Library.

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history interviews to craft a one-act play, "Voices of Old Town: Variations on a History," that was staged at Perspectives 2 in October 2009 as part of the Lansing 150 sesquicentennial celebration. The film itself was screened the same week at Studio 1210 before an audience that included many of the subjects interviewed in the film and residents of Old Town.

The Historical Society of Greater Lansing is pleased to announce that Prof. Stowe and some of his students will screen "Specters of Lansing" at our next meeting on Thursday, March 17 at 7:00 pm at the downtown branch of the Capitol Area District Library. Prof. Stowe and his students will discuss the movie and answer questions about the film and their research at that time.



*Above, North Presbyterian Church, Old Town
National Register of Historical Sites*

Right, Michigan Association of Counties, Old Town

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public could enjoy them". More than 50 years later the very features that the Journal praised were among the reasons for a complete building renovation. The Zoo manager referring to the ongoing renovation in February 1987 said, "Now their environment will be much larger, more natural, and will be designed to fit the character of the animal".

After a successful fund raising campaign, the renovated and renamed Feline/Primate Building, designed by Mashburn/Bunkley and constructed by Granger Construction, opened May 1989. The interior simulated a lush forest. Carpeting covered the concrete. Iron railings and bars were removed. Ramps led visitors close to animals seen through glass windows. A skylight dispelled the gloom. The West door was closed to the public. Outside and in color featuring blue brightened the building. Greatly expanded and naturalized outdoor exhibits surrounded the building. Decorative lamps graced the entrance. The austere, depressing (for humans and probably for animals) Lion House had become an attractive marvelous showcase for beautiful creatures of the wild.

Other Historical Happenings

Linda Peckham, longtime HSGL member, asked that the following event be announced:

"Words of the Civil War: Kinds of Truth" - Presentations and discussion by a poet, a historian, and a storyteller - Friday, April 1, 7:00 pm, Schuler Books, Eastwood Towne Center - Learn more at www.arallyofwriters.com





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