

History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

August 2012

Fall 2012 Silent Auction at the Michigan / Strand Theatre!

Saturday, October 6, 2012 - 4:00pm to 7:00pm

**The Old Michigan / Strand Theatre (Atrium Office Building)
215 South Washington Square, Lansing
\$15.00 per person**

We have begun preparations for our annual silent auction to raise funds for founding a Lansing area historical museum. Last year, with the help of our members and the community, our society raised nearly \$10,000 towards our goal. Since that time we've taken many significant steps, including leasing a space in the Creyts building and launching our very first mini-exhibit, *When Everyone Shopped Downtown*.

This year we hope to build on our success from last fall to continue our fundraising efforts to create this new museum. We have already obtained a number of unique and one-of-a-kind items for the the auction on which you will not want to miss the chance to bid. We shall share more about those items in next month's *History Explorer*.

In order to make the auction a success once again, we need your help! Please consider donating an item or experience for the auction. The more creative, the better! Suggestions for donations include: gift certificates to area restaurants and businesses; vacation packages and getaways; books; historical collectibles; MSU, Lugnuts, and other sports team tickets and memorabilia; memberships and passes to museums and galleries; dinner out with a local celebrity; exclusive tours of Lansing landmarks; jewelry; spa and gift packages; artwork; theatre and concert tickets; home improvement/gardening packages; and kiddy baskets.

You may also contribute to the auction by serving as a financial sponsor of the event. We have several sponsorship levels available that include advertising in our program and free tickets to the auction.

If you would like to donate an auction item or serve as an event sponsor, please fill out the enclosed donor form and send it in to the Historical Society at P.O. Box 12095, Lansing MI 48901. Additional forms can be found on HSGL's website, www.lansinghistory.org, under the heading *Silent Auction*. **Please note that all donations must be made by September 17th, 2012.** If you have any questions about making a donation, or need your donation to be picked up, please call Valerie Marvin at (517) 282-0671.

Evergreen Cemetery Tour

Mark your calendars for HSGL's annual cemetery tour on Sunday, August 19, 2012 from 2:00pm to 3:30pm at Evergreen Cemetery, located on Mt. Hope Rd. The tour will focus on the Lansing area's expansive growth in the 20th Century, as personified by several families of note. Families to be highlighted include the VanderVoorts (VanderVoort's Hardware), C.W. Otto (namesake of Otto Middle School), the Popoff family (Popoff Market), the McClintocks (auto dealerships), the Abrams (aerial surveying) as well as two MSU professors, a local fire chief, and others! The tour will run, rain or shine.

The History of the Boys Training School – A State of Michigan Operated Facility

On Thursday evening, September 20th, HSGL Trustee Jesse LaSorda will give a presentation about the infamous Michigan Boys' Training School, located near the campus of Eastern High School in Lansing. Come and learn the stories behind the institution, including the identity of the first superintendent of the Boys' Training School (who was involved with the Underground Railroad in Michigan), as well as the identities of the sixty-one boys who died while at the facility (including where they are buried). Learn about the ties between the Boys' Training School and the United States military, the land on which the school was located, and why the facility was finally closed.

In addition to serving as an HSGL board member, Jesse LaSorda is also the president of the Lansing African-American Genealogical Society, and the co-chair of the Ingham County Historical Commission.

When: Thursday evening, September 20, 2012, 7:00pm

Where: Downtown CADL library auditorium, located at 401 S. Capitol Ave.

When Everyone Shopped Downtown Exhibit

If you've not yet had a chance to visit HSGL's exhibit, *When Everyone Shopped Downtown*, you have one more opportunity! The exhibit will be open on Sunday afternoon, September 2, from 1:00pm to 4:00 pm. The exhibit is located on the ground floor of the Creyts building at 831 N. Washington Ave. Parking is available in the lot directly west of the building.

Governor G. Mennen “Soapy” Williams

by Bill Castanier

G. Mennen Williams cut quite a political swath in Michigan politics serving as Governor 12 years (six-two year terms from 1948-1960) and later as a Justice of the Michigan Supreme Court from 1970-1986. What’s even more remarkable is he ascended to those offices with the unlikely nickname of “Soapy” while wearing a green polka-dot bow tie.

For a modern politician, being called “Soapy” would be too close to “slippery” and polka-dot bow ties would be labeled clown-like, but G. Mennen Williams “wore” both on the cover of Time magazine sixty years ago September 15, 1952.

The artful likeness of Williams complete with his unibrow and a great big smile was surrounded by “tiny bubbles” perhaps a hats off to Lawrence Welk and a sideways reference to William’s folksy habit of calling square dances and jumping in at hometown polkas.

The stories of how Soapy came to wear a bow tie are legion and some are apocryphal ranging from a gift from his children, or a gift from his friend and former Governor Frank Murphy after William’s dipped his traditional tie in a bowl of soup, but the most likely story is the one recounted in the Thomas J. Noer’s 2005 biography of Williams. In “Soapy” Noer tells how Williams’ brother gave him the tie to wear to his 1948 inaugural as a “good luck symbol.” The green and white of the bow tie not only matched the colors of the campaign, but Williams signed his correspondence with green ink.

Noer writes, “The cravat became his trademark for the rest of his life, and he wore it daily, even with formal clothing at John F. Kennedy’s funeral.” Noer’s book still stands as the best biography of Williams. An earlier biography “Mennen Williams of Michigan” written in 1960 by former newsman Frank McNaughton is more folksy in its approach, but Williams apparently liked the book and copious quantities of it were given away by the Governor’s office as gifts.

Bookplates read “With deep appreciation for your friendship and your continued interest in good government.” John Voelker whose novel “Anatomy of a Murder” was on the best sellers list at the time provided a preface to the book.

Soapy was seldom seen without his bow tie, but he made an exception for a 1954 appearance on the TV Show “What’s My Line”. Wearing what one panelist called “Robert Q. Lewis glasses” to disguise his identity Williams signed in with his given name “Gerhard”.

After the opening question of “Do you work for a profit-making operation?” (laughter), it didn’t take the panel of questioners long to identify Williams as the Governor of Michigan.

Williams told the panel of questioners, “My opponents have just told me we fooled over a million people but we couldn’t fool you.” Williams then gave each of the panel and the host one of his bow ties to take home.

His opponents must’ve cringed when they saw his picture on the cover of Time with the headline reading: “Michigan’s Governor “Soapy” Williams, Polkas and polka dots, and the C.I.O. too.” The only other Michigan governor who can claim the cover of Time is Governor Frank Murphy who was on the cover of Time on August 28, 1939 as the new Attorney General of the United States. The occasion for William’s coverage was Time’s look at the 1952 national presidential campaign and the roles various states would play in determining who the next president would be.

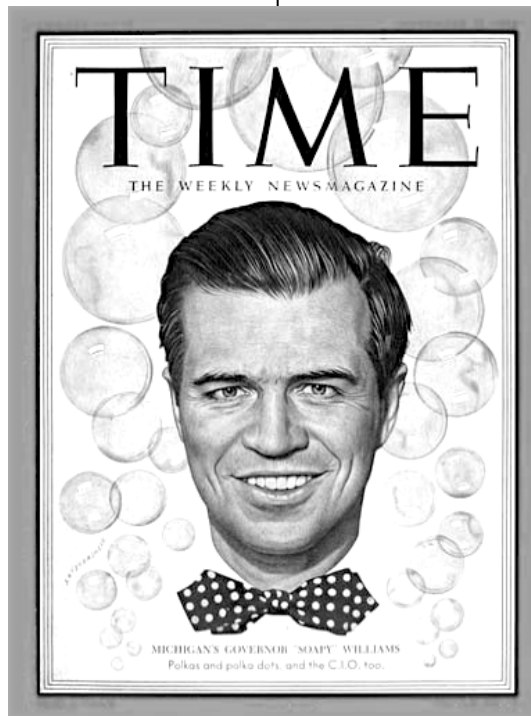
The three-page article on Williams, who was 41 at the time, references him as “Michigan’s political prodigy” and points out that he was only the second (at the time) Michigan Democratic Governor to be elected in a non-presidential year. In 1952, Williams was in the race for Governor against Fred Alger Jr. who was Michigan Secretary of State in charge of what at that time was a patronage-rich system.

Alger was also from the storied political family of former Governor and Secretary of War

Republican Fred Alger. The Time article said that the two candidates knew each other well; both coming from what Time called “Detroit’s crusty, old time high society.”

The article says Williams liked to separate himself from his opponent by saying Alger “travelled in the pony-polo class while I was in the tennis-racket crowd.”

Time recounts how Alger was responsible for William’s ascension into politics by getting him appointed as a state liquor commissioner from where Williams jumped to Governorship by defeating the incumbent Kim Sigler. Alger



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should've known better since Williams had previously been an appointee in the Roosevelt administration.

The article illustrated with a photo of Williams as choirboy is nearly giddy about Williams whom it calls "an uncommon politician" who "runs Michigan with a fine air of democracy and honest folksiness." It goes on to say that "Soapy detests pomp and formality, sends his three youngsters to Lansing Public Schools." Time gives a shout out to his wife Nancy and says that she runs their rambling old house eight blocks from the Capitol with only one maid to help. The house can still be seen just off Grand Ave in Lansing abutting the I-496 expressway. At the time Michigan did not provide a Governor's mansion and previous Governors were often relegated to hotel rooms in downtown Lansing. Williams and his spouse Nancy were both from wealthy backgrounds, Williams an heir to the Mennen bath products fortune.

The article covers his prep school times, college at Princeton and his marriage to Nancy while in law school at the University of Michigan. It was while at U-M which was populated by many New Deal professors that Soapy flipped to become a Democrat which the Time article claims was "much to the distress of his family."

The article also briefly explains how Governor Frank Murphy hired him as an assistant attorney General. Murphy who would later run Roosevelt's Justice Department also named him as his executive assistant.

The article then tells of William's service in World War II, his role in prosecuting Michigan Republican leader Frank McKay for corruption (McKay was found innocent) and of his close relationship with the C.I.O. and the Michigan Democratic Club. The Time article briefly makes reference to what they call "goon politics" of the C.I.O.

In balance, Time which is overall effusive about Williams, writes that William's is "an ineffective governor largely because he plays his legislative program from a partisan angle."

In 1952 and in 1956, Williams was a delegate to the National Democratic Convention which both times nominated Adlai Stevenson. In 1960, William's supporters thought he might have a shot at vice president on the Kennedy ticket but that was not to be.

In 1961, fed up with state politics Williams left office and was appointed as an Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs, a post which he held for five years. In one of William's only missteps he left that office to take on the Senator Robert Griffin, a race which he lost. In 1970, he was elected to the Michigan Supreme Court and served as the Chief Justice from 1983 until he left the court in 1987.

William's is known for his old school campaigning style characterized by lots of smiles and handshaking. Wearing his bow tie on a 6'4" frame he stood out in the crowd.

Former Governor James J. Blanchard recalls as a young boy first seeing Williams in person and thinking, "God he's a giant of a man." Blanchard said the 1952 Democratic campaign office wasn't far from his home in Pleasant Ridge

and he started handing out leaflets door-to-door for the William's campaign. Later, Williams called a square dance at his high school and while on Mackinac Island with the Boy Scouts Blanchard raised the flag at the Governor's summer home.

Governor Blanchard said his activism with Williams came full circle in 1982 when Williams presided over his swearing in as Governor. "He actually swore me in twice," Blanchard said. The first time was in a hotel room with a Gideon Bible (which Blanchard still has) and then later at the formal ceremony. Blanchard said Williams was adamant that he be sworn in right after midnight in case something went wrong in Michigan.

Although Blanchard recalls Williams' common touches like calling square dances and going into the kitchen to shake everyone's hand he says that Williams "was not a schmoozer."

"He did not make small talk, but with his bow tie and nickname everyone wanted to see him and thought they knew him," he said. "They would see him and think that they had met him before even if they hadn't." And Williams played off that perception shaking every hand, while saying "Nice to see you again."

Blanchard said one of Williams' major accomplishments as Governor was shepherding the construction of the Mackinac Bridge after it was labeled "Soapy's folly." He also began the tradition of the annual Labor Day walk across the bridge.



In retrospect Williams was a campaign genius who was able to turn a polka dot bow tie and a nickname laid on him at summer camp for his ties to Mennen into icons which to this day are unparalleled political trademarks. Blanchard said the bow tie became so recognizable that Williams supporters would hand out facsimile cardboard ties and sticky back ties during campaign stops and small lapel pins in the shape of a bow tie were highly sought. The iconic tie ultimately would stand alone in campaign ads with no name attached and his real bow ties would become collectibles in an era of milk-toast candidates wearing jeans, rolled up sleeves and no cravat at all.



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P.O. Box 12095
Lansing, MI 48901

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