

History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

May 2015

The Secrets of the Harper House

Tuesday, May 12, 2015 – 6:00pm

Harper House - 1408 Cambridge Rd., Lansing

\$50 per person

Join HSGL for a behind the scenes look at the Harper House, Lansing's largest and most elegant historic home. Built for Harry and Ragna Harper just before the Great Depression struck, the home stands as a testimony to Lansing's auto prowess in the 1920s. President of the Prudden Wheel Company, and then the President and General Manager of Lansing's Motor Wheel, Harper used his wealth and civic standing to do great good in the community, including serving as a major patron of both Sparrow and St. Lawrence Hospitals.

The evening includes hors d'oeuvres and a tour of the home. Please see reverse side of insert for information on tickets and sponsorships. All funds raised benefit the HSGL museum fund.

HSGL Annual Meeting - A History of LCC

Saturday, June 6, 2015 - 11:45am Lunch and Lecture

1:00pm Walking Tour

Lansing Community College, Arts & Sciences Building

Rooms 104 & 105

Join HSGL and LCC History Professor David Siwik for a lecture on the history of LCC over lunch at 11:45 followed by a walking tour of the campus detailing both the history of the college and its newly installed colorful artwork at 1:00. Reservations for lunch are required. Please RSVP to (517) 282-0671 or info@lansinghistory.org by May 30 to attend. Reservations for the walking tour are not required.

Lansing Goes to War Exhibit

Lansing City Hall – 124 W. Michigan Ave.

Monday – Friday, 7:30am – 6:00pm

Through June 30th

HSGL's new pop up exhibit, *Lansing Goes to War*, a collection of 150 artifacts and ephemera from the Civil War to the First Gulf War, is open. Thanks to all those who joined us on March 5 for the opening. The exhibit includes uniforms, medals for bravery, letters sent home, locally made war-themed art, and other mementos from Lansing families.

Items from the home front are also included, such as the first tank shell manufactured by Oldsmobile during World War II, and a scrapbook kept by an Eastern High School student while her sweetheart and future husband fought overseas. Other iconic items include two nurses uniforms, mess kits, and a telegram sent to a Lansing army wife beginning with the words "We regret to inform you..." Through this exhibit we are reminded that war affects everyone, both on the battlefield and at home.

The Lansing Goes to War exhibit will also be open from 10:00am-5:00pm on Saturday, May 30 for Be A Tourist in Your Own Town. If you would like to volunteer at the exhibit that day, please call (517) 282-0671 or send an e-mail to info@lansinghistory.org.

Vietnam Veterans Panel

Thursday, May 21, 2015 – 7:00pm

Lansing City Hall - 124 W. Michigan Ave.

Please join HSGL and panel moderator Scott Shattuck for a conversation with three area Vietnam War Veterans as a part of our ongoing Lansing Goes to War series. Topics to be discussed include areas where the men served, their roles during their service, and the process of returning home.

**The House That Luck Built:
The Home of Harry and Ragna Harper**

By Valerie Marvin

In 1927, Harry and Ragna Harper made what was probably one of their wisest decisions of their life when they decided to cash out approximately half a million dollars in stocks to build their dream home in Lansing, Michigan. Originally from Minnesota, Ragna and Harry both grew up in relatively modest households. Their arrival in Lansing, however, was perfectly timed to coincide with the blossoming of the early auto industry. (Seeing the adjoining obituary.) Such was the timing of their investment that by the time the house was completed and paid for in 1929, that same stock, which they prudently cashed in at the beginning of the project, was now virtually worthless. Thus their home earned its moniker, "The House That Luck Built."

Harper House is the work of architect Harold Beckett, a Canadian born Detroit architect who designed many significant homes in the 1920s and 1930s while in partnership with the firm Akitt & Beckett. Faced in stone, the home is constructed largely of poured concrete, a technique then fashionable for large auto factories in Detroit. While very much a modern home for the time, great care was taken to give the home a traditional English Tudor aesthetic.

The Harpers filled the home with objects inspired by the best that the world had to offer in the 1920s. The entryway is paper in a Grecian style hand painted wallpaper, that evokes the height of the Greek and Roman Empires,

and the influences of sites like Pompeii. Elegant English style wainscoting brings warmth to the main hall and library. Striking figures of St. Martin of Tours, about to split his cloak, and St. George slaying the dragon, hang in the hall. The hallway opens up into a lovely marble staircase that features a striking wrought iron banister that sweeps upward. Overhead, a colorful Murano glass chandelier, believed to be purchased in Italian, hangs.

Though the Harpers built the home to serve as their private residence, they opened it regularly to host large parties for the community. Each spring Ragna Harper, one of Lansing's most acclaimed entertainers, hosted a Tulip Tea for hundreds of ladies in the spring timed perfectly with the

blooming of the elaborate sunken gardens still maintained by the home's owners today. It is said that women from the East Coast traveled to Lansing to be a part of the event. Floral and plant motifs can also be found in the plasterwork throughout the home, including oak leaves and acorns representing hard work and prosperity, as well as the English Tudor rose, evocative of the home's English style.



The Harpers also opened their home to both their Lansing friends and family throughout the holiday season, hosting annually four different Christmas parties, each for groups of approximately forty people throughout the month of December. One Christmas visitor, Betty Ritter, the Harper's niece, wrote a short essay detailing her visit in 1930, when her family consisting of eight children and their parents traveled from Minnesota to Lansing on the train. Her recollection of the trip reads like a storybook, from the ride in a private train car to being greeted by "Aunt Snooks" at the station who was waiting with limousines in which they rode to the magnificent new house. "Aunt Snooks had the whole house lit up to welcome us. There was a candle in every window and it looked like a fairy tale."

We hope that you will consider joining HSGL and our generous hosts, Mr. Brian Huggler and Mr. Ken Ross, as they continue the Harpers tradition of opening their home for your own magical trip to the Harper House on May 12.

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901
www.LansingHistory.org

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Long Illness Ends in Death HARRY FREDERICK HARPER

Excerpts from Mr. Harper's Obituary, which ran in the Lansing State Journal on August 8, 1949. Thank you to Timothy Bowman for procuring the obituary.

"Born in Milwaukee, Wis., July 15, 1881, he lived there during his early life attending public schools and graduating from a high school business course.

"At the turn of the century he came to Lansing as a young man, and was employed for a short time with the Michigan Distributing company, a farm equipment firm which was located at the present site of the New York Central freight house. Mr. Harper soon changed employment in Lansing, however, quitting the distributing company to go with the W.K. Prudden and Co.

"When the Motor Wheel corporation was organized, Jan. 17, 1920, Mr. Harper was named president and general manager, a position he held until his retirement, Dec. 31, 1946. . .

"...The Motor Wheel Co., one of Lansing's largest industries, was organized by Mr. Harper in association with D. L. Porter, president of the Auto Wheel Co., and the late B.S. Gier, vice president and general manager of the Gier Pressed Steel company. Mr. Porter was then named vice president of the new firm and Mr. Gier treasurer. The company included a manufacturing company in Memphis, Tenn.

"During Harper regime, the Motor Wheel Co. began manufacturing heating equipment and its Duo-Therm division now ranks as the largest producer of oil heating equipment in the nation...



"...For many years, he served as a member of the board of water and electric light commissioners, being first appointed in 1935. He helped to organize the Duplex Truck company, the Chamber of Commerce, the old Community Welfare Fund, the Central Trust company, and the Lansing City club. On a national scale, he was one of the founders of the Automotive Parts Manufacturers association.

"Mr. Harper was also active in the Edward W. Sparrow hospital affairs for more than 20 years and was an original member of the executive committee, which now directs its affairs.

"During the depression, he was one of Lansing's leaders who was credited with doing most toward keeping the hospital solvent. Later, he headed a committee formed to clear up a deficit the institution had incurred over the depression period...



" . . . In addition to his work at Sparrow, Mr. Harper was one of the early figures with the late Edmund C. Shields, who helped finance erection of the St. Lawrence Hospital . . .

"On June 29, 1904, Mr. Harper was married to Ragna Mickelson of Milwaukee. The couple made their home in Lansing.

"They attended the Plymouth Congregational church and he was a member of the Masonic Lodge, including the Shrine and the Knights Templar and the Lansing Lodge of the B.P.O.E. The couple were members of the Country Club of Lansing, the Detroit Athletic Club, and he belonged to the Society of Automotive Engineers since 1917."



Treasures From The Vault

The Morlok Quadruplets' Scrapbook

by Mary L. Kwas

With this first article we are introducing a new feature series called Treasures from the Vault. Its focus will be on the history of Greater Lansing as found through interesting items tucked away in various archives, small museums, long-time businesses, and among personal collections. Articles in the series will appear occasionally in the newsletter, perhaps 6 times per year, depending on submissions. We hope readers will be inspired to contribute ideas or articles to make this an interesting series.

Among the collections of the Forest Parke Library & Archives, located at the Capital Area District Libraries-Downtown Branch, are a number of scrapbooks, including one donated in 2006 by Sarah Morlok Cotton. Cotton was one of the famous Lansing quadruplets, and the scrapbook includes newspaper articles, photographs, newsletter articles, and other bits of ephemera covering the quads' lives from birth to young adulthood.

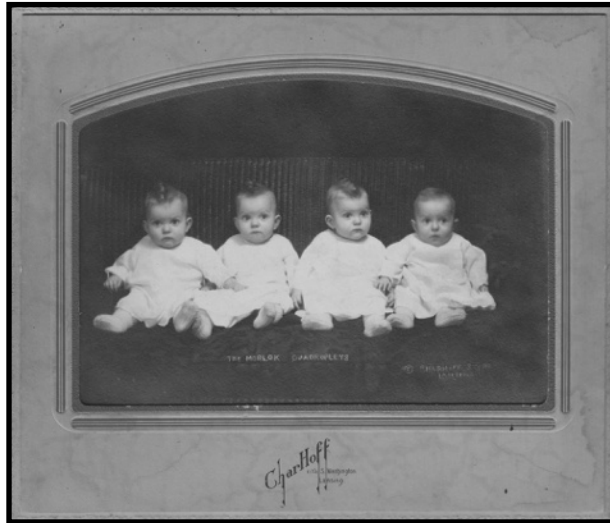
Before the advent of fertility drugs in the late 20th century, multiple births of four or more babies were not only rare, but rarely did all survive beyond their first birthdays. The Canadian Dionne quintuplets, born in 1934, became international celebrities for this reason. But before the quints, surviving quadruplets were sensational news. When the Morlok quadruplets made their appearance on May 19, 1930, they were hailed as the first quads in Lansing's history, the only quads then in Michigan, and one of only a few sets throughout their early lives in all of the United States.

The quads were born to Carl and Sadie Lyons Morlok, their first and only children. Born just seven months after the infamous stock market crash that led to the Great Depression, the babies' parents faced an uncertain future with Carl working only a few days a week. But Lansing rallied to their cause. The mayor offered them the use of a city-owned house for the first year and a dairy contributed daily supplies of milk for the first six months. The quads even helped their father land a permanent job, when the following year Carl mounted a successful campaign for constable. With pictures of his daughters on his campaign cards, the father and daughters noted "We Will Appreciate Your Support." Carl held his position as constable until his death 26 years later.

When the babies were born they were designated only as A, B, C, and D in birth order, and names were not chosen for about a week. With quad fever running high, local papers held

naming contests and received over 12,000 suggested names. The parents selected names inspired by the initials of Edward W. Sparrow Hospital, where the babies were born, and retained the birth order initials as middle names. Thus the girls became Edna A., Wilma B., Sarah C., and Helen D.

It soon became evident that these four charming little girls were also identical quads. Multiple births can occur in various combinations. Quads can be no more genetically alike than successively born siblings, or may consist of one or two pairs of identical twins, or a combination of identicals and siblings. But four identical babies are very rare indeed. Sadie dressed her daughters alike, which made the blond-haired, hazel-eyed girls even more photogenic. As the scrapbook shows, the press returned year after year to photograph the quads with their birthday cakes, on their scooters, beginning grade school, in high school, and registering to vote.



Shortly after birth they became members of the Equitable Reserve Association, a fraternal insurance society, so also became known as the E.R.A. Quads. The girls performed song and dance routines for ERA gatherings and at other venues throughout Michigan and in Ohio and Pennsylvania. Unlike the Dionne quintuplets, however, the Lansing sisters were not constantly in the public eye. They lived in a regular home, which was located on Saginaw Street near Pennsylvania, and the girls attended nearby Oak Park Elementary School and later Eastern

High School with their age-mates.

Even though they were identical quads, there were differences between them, some of which may have been caused by differences in the prenatal environment. The girls tended to pair off, with Edna and Sarah together and Wilma and Helen together. There were height differences between the pairs, with Wilma and Helen being a little smaller, and a study of their fingerprints also showed closer similarities in the pair groupings. Wilma and Helen were also the first two to pass away, a little less than two years apart in 2002 and 2003. Edna passed away on April 10, 2015. They rest now in Chapel Hill Memorial Gardens in DeWitt.

While all four sisters were still alive in 2001 at the age of 71, they were the oldest-living quadruplets in the world still making history and still making Lansing their home. The Morlok quads scrapbook is a special gift to the CADL archives and to Lansing history.

We wish a very happy 85th birthday this month to Sarah C.

Historical Society of Greater Lansing Harper House Fundraiser

Tuesday, May 12, 2015 - 6:00pm-8:00pm

Harper House - 1408 Cambridge Road, Lansing

Number of tickets _____ Total enclosed \$ _____ (\$50.00 per person)
See Reverse for Sponsorship Opportunities

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Historical Society of Greater Lansing Harper House Fundraiser

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_____ \$500 Additional Gift – Gold - full page advertisement

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