



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

January-February 2020

Upcoming Events

The Lansing City Saunter

Thursday, January 16 – 7:00 p.m.

Library of Michigan, Lake Erie Room, 702 W. Kalamazoo

The Historical Society of Greater Lansing sponsors numerous walking tours each spring and summer, but when it comes to walking Lansing's neighborhoods, Ariniko O'Meara can boast she walked all 531 miles of the city's streets. Come hear O'Meara recount her successful three-year quest, which she documented in two books, *A City Saunter Story* and *The City Saunter Project*, both of which will be available for sale. The event is free.

Friends Exhibit Continues

Through January

Library of Michigan, 702 W. Kalamazoo

"Friends," an exhibit of photography and ephemera celebrating the life and writing of Haslett native and MSU graduate Jim Harrison, will be held over until February 1, 2020, due to popular demand. Harrison, who died in 2016, left a legacy of more than 60 novels, poetry collections, memoirs and non-fiction books.

Emanuel First Lutheran Church Tour

Saturday, February 8 – 2:00 p.m.

1001 N. Capitol Avenue; use the door next to the flagpole

Emanuel First Evangelical Lutheran Church was founded in 1855 by a group of German immigrants. The first building stood at the corner of Seymour and Kilborn, where a brick parsonage now stands. Services were held exclusively in German until 1921, when occasional English services were added and gradually became the norm. The last regular German service was held in 2002.

There are three stages to the complex: the church itself, dedicated in 1917; the office wing, built in celebration of the congregation's centennial; and the school/gym wing, dedicated in 1994. The tour will touch on aspects of all of these facilities and others that no longer exist. If it's a sunny

day, the church's stained and painted windows will show up beautifully. The tour will be led by Mary Black Junttonen, HGSL member and a lifelong member of Emanuel. She is also co-chair of the church archives committee and current choir director. Other volunteers will assist. We will give a brief introduction and show some historic photos.

Handicap-accessible parking is available in the 1000 block of Seymour Avenue, on the west side of the property. All levels of the building are accessible; it will be possible, if necessary, to see the important areas without using stairs. For more information, contact Mary Black Junttonen, 517-646-9626 or blackma@msu.edu.

Woman's Suffrage: The West Came First

Thursday, March 19 – 6:30 p.m.

The Forum, Michigan Historical Center, 702 W. Kalamazoo

Join Michigan Women Forward and the National Women's History Museum for a panel discussion about the woman's suffrage movement in the Midwest, including Michigan. The panel will include scholars from multiple states, and will be moderated by Capitol Historian & HSGL Vice President Valerie Marvin. Check out the March/April issue of *The History Explorer* for more information.

Swimming Pool Architect Wesley Bintz and the Moores Park Swimming Pool

by Tegan D'Arcangelis Baiocchi

As temperatures ventured into the 100s in the summer of 1922, the residents of Lansing were getting antsy. And sweaty. With their first outdoor municipal swimming pool sitting half-finished in Moores Park, who could blame them? Finally, during the last week of August, the concrete floor of the pool deck was finished and city engineer Wesley Bintz saw no reason to make them wait any longer. He told the city to fill the pool and allow for residents to start swimming, even

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Swimming Pool Architect... - Cont'd from page 1

though the locker rooms and other mechanics were not quite completed. “There are no lockers and any change of attire may have to be made under an umbrella,” Bintz told the Lansing State Journal, “or inside a barrel.”

Undressing in barrels aside, Wesley Bintz was confident enough in the design of the swimming pool to allow for an early opening. Not only had he overseen the construction of the unique structure, he had also designed it. Nearly immediately, Bintz’s gamble paid off. Within a week of the premature opening, Moores Park Swimming Pool, or J.H. Moores Memorial Natatorium, as it was officially named, was filled with people swimming and sunbathing—even boy scouts who were testing their diving and life-saving skills. When the pool closed for the season only a few weeks later, a notice was put out warning “bathers who have been accustomed to taking a plunge after dark” to look before they leap, since the pool would be emptied for the winter. Late-night high divers were encouraged to “at least inspect the concrete floor of the pool for a soft spot to land on.” And thus, the Moores Park Swimming Pool became the crown jewel of both the Lansing City Parks system and Wesley Bintz’s career as a swimming pool architect and engineer.

The pool at Moores Park was not the first swimming pool Wesley Bintz had designed, but the fourth. The first two were constructed in Flint in 1919 while he was employed with the city as a structural engineer, and the third, in Douglas Park, Indianapolis, opened to swimmers just a week before the Moores Park pool in 1922. The Douglas Park Swimming Pool was declared by Indianapolis authorities as “one of the best pieces of engineering ingenuity of its kind in the middle west,” and the city of Indianapolis planned on using the design as the standard for all future municipal swimming pools. Still, Bintz did not consider himself a swimming pool expert. Designing swimming pools is not a hobby, he told the Lansing State Journal in 1922. Bridges and road construction were more his focus, but he just submitted his ideas to both Indianapolis and Lansing, and they were eagerly adopted. Less than a year later, Bintz patented his “Bintz Swimming Pool” design and left the city to pursue swimming pool work full time.

Bintz’s ideas centered around designing a pool that was essentially above-ground and self-contained. He described

it as an inverted straw hat lying on a table, with the table representing the ground, the crown of the hat representing the swimming area, and the changing rooms situated under the brim. The best shape for the pool was egg-shaped, or ovoid, though the design could be adapted for a rectangular structure. The advantages over a traditional sunken pool, Bintz argued, are clear. The above-ground plan drastically cut any required excavation costs while allowing for more efficient ground space, and required the construction of only one structure, rather than two separate structures. Even the ovoid shape was chosen for optimal efficiency; Bintz claimed that the egg shape allowed for more usable, or swimmable, space than a rectangular pool due to the lack of corners, and provided for a larger shallow end. Aside from the cost advantage, the “Bintz Swimming Pool” also offered a more aesthetic and practical advantage over the traditional sunken pool in that, as a structure, spectators could be given designated space to watch the swimmers without the need of an “unsightly wire fence” for safety or security. Bintz also claimed that because the pool was a permanent concrete structure, it required “practically no maintenance,” though this claim would prove to be less than accurate.

Bintz developed his pool design at the very beginning of what Jeff Wiltse, the author of *Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America*, calls the Swimming Pool Age, which lasted from 1920 until 1940. At the turn of the 20th century, a swimming pool was something that usually could only be found in a very large city or at an athletic club, and smaller communities were often limited to lake swimming or swimming holes dug into the bank of a river. As time progressed, however, the public’s interest and belief in the importance of health and leisure grew, and swimming became an extremely fashionable pastime for both adults and children. By the 1920s hundreds of outdoor municipal swimming pools of all shapes and sizes were popping up in communities big and small. The Bintz Swimming Pool was one of the most unique, recognizable, and popular swimming pool designs to emerge during this era, and because of his patent, which he defended vigorously, Wesley Bintz was involved in each and every one of his Bintz Swimming Pools. By the time the Moores Park swimming pool approached its 10th anniversary, Bintz had constructed at least 30 additional above-ground swimming pools in 15 states. The Great Depression also proved

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P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901

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Fig. 1: Postcard view of Moores Park Pool, ca. 1944.

a busy time for Bintz, as the diminished costs associated with building a Bintz Swimming Pool made it a popular choice for Works Progress Administration projects; between 1935 and 1941, Bintz designed six swimming pools in five states that were funded by WPA grants. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Bintz pools saw a resurgence in popularity as veterans memorials.

Between 1919 and 1967, Wesley Bintz designed and built at least 135 swimming pools in at least 23 states. Early in his career he experimented with different styles and designs, but eventually settled into five or six standard forms that he adjusted based on size and other needs of the client. While his earliest swimming pools exhibited Craftsman, Art Moderne, and Art Deco stylistic elements, later pools ventured into Mid-Century Modern aesthetics, mirroring the preferences of the day. Later Bintz Swimming Pools are generally much smaller than earlier



Fig. 2: Profile on Wesley Bintz from the Lansing State Journal, July 13, 1958.

swimming and racing. As public interest and pool revenues declined, maintenance was deferred, and aging pools were replaced or simply removed. Though many survived longer than their traditional counterparts, the design of the Bintz Swimming Pool presented its own problems. While Bintz had extolled his pools as “practically maintenance free,” they were only estimated to have a lifespan of approximately 30 years without major renovation. The pools, being structures, were highly susceptible to moisture damage. Though Bintz had insisted that the band of windows curving around the whole of the pool would provide sufficient ventilation and prevent moisture issues, many cities replaced those operating windows with glass block, reducing air flow.

The Moores Park Swimming Pool continued to be a popular and important spot in the city of Lansing for recreation, culture, and social life. Aside from just swimming and cooling off, the pool soon hosted special events and expositions, such as an elaborate 1927 water carnival that featured lifesaving drills, free swimming lessons, “fancy diving,” and pageants, all of which was overseen by Father Neptune, who would hold court over the event on his throne. In 1932, after ten years of operation,

the J.H. Moores Memorial Natatorium was still touted as the peak of modern health and recreation, with state-of-the-art filters and regular maintenance that kept the pool water to the same standards as the city’s drinking water. Children would begin lining up to swim nearly an hour before the pool opened each day, and the swimming continued well into the evening thanks to large flood lights that illuminated the pool. In 1934 the pool’s locker rooms were updated with new girls’ lockers and shower rooms, and a new “Oil-O-Matic” water heater for the showers. Updates to the pool occurred relatively regularly, with new filtration systems installed in the 1960s, and a major overhaul in 1980 that included a new concrete bottom, new sundeck and rails, renovated dressing rooms and shower facilities, and a handicapped accessible ramp.

The Moores Park swimming pool is special for several reasons. Not only is the pool located in the city in which its designer lived and worked, but it also represents the turning point at which swimming pool design went from “not even a hobby” for Wesley Bintz to a long and successful career. While it is representative of the Bintz Swimming Pool model, there are elements that are unique to the Moores Park pool, such as the hillside spectator area, that have contributed to its long life. It’s also special, not just because of the pool itself, but the way it has survived and thrived, primarily with regular maintenance and renovations early in its history, and the support and determination of a strong neighborhood organization and community that recognize its importance to the culture and social health of the surrounding area that has fought to keep the pool open.

Unfortunately, the Moores Park swimming pool is becoming increasingly special in its rarity. Of the approximately 135 Bintz Swimming Pools that once stood, there are maybe 17 still standing today. Of those, only eight opened for swimming last summer. One, the 1940 Coleman Memorial Park pool in Lebanon, Pennsylvania, was approved for demolition December 16, 2019. Another, the 1947 Payne Park pool in Tonawanda, New York, is likely facing replacement in the next year or two. However, with a meaningful preservation and maintenance plan, and community support, there’s no reason why the Moores Park swimming pool couldn’t last another 100 years or more.

For more information and photographs, visit the Wesley Bintz Swimming Pool Network’s Facebook page at www.facebook.com/groups/516532988361879/, or the Flickr site at <https://www.flickr.com/groups/bintzpools/>.



Fig. 3: Moores Park Pool today.



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P.O. Box 12095
Lansing, MI 48901

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