



The Crow's Nest

Newsletter of The Ferndale Historical Society

Fall 2008



Photo: Courtesy of The Daily Tribune

Early Years
Between Withington & Nine Mile Road
Before
Federal's and Radio City Theater were built
R. Elmers Collection

FERNDALE'S MOTOR MILE: CAR SHOPPING ON WOODWARD, 1921+

Jean Spang

"Hodges for Dodges" remains one of the most-remembered advertising slogans in Ferndale history. Reflective of the proud position of "the car" in America's culture and the auto industry's "Golden Age," this slogan also recalls the role that auto dealerships have played in marking the city as a significant "destination" on Woodward. Through the years, the "Motor Mile," with its ever-changing roster of dealers, has hosted every make and model of the Big Three, and, increasingly, imports as well. The Motor Mile, therefore, has an important place in Ferndale history.

Given the busy Woodward/9 intersection, and the close proximity to Highland Park's Ford plant, it was inevitable that the first auto business to locate in the Village of Ferndale would be a Ford dealership: Leasia Motor Sales. The Leasia salesroom opened in 1921 on 9 Mile--on the immediate west side of the village's new Aston-Wallace Building, built in 1920 at the southwest corner of the famous crossroads. Yet it was on Woodward, the main route from Detroit north, where most auto dealerships in Ferndale would soon locate.

Initially, markets for local auto sales were modest. Of the village's 12,000 residents in the early 1920s, many had, according to directory listings, traditional occupations such as "cooper," "harness maker," "blacksmith," and "farmer." Only some 630 Ferndale residents were listed as "auto workers"--who, as Henry Ford famously said, were the type of workers who could afford to buy his products. (A Ford Model T in 1926 cost \$260.)

But by 1923 the competition for auto sales in the village had begun: A Chevrolet agency, the Wallace-Hartman Co., took over the Leasia showroom on 9 Mile, and, significantly, the Cote Motor Co., a Ford agency, opened on the northeast Woodward/Saratoga corner--the beginning of the Motor Mile as the local auto sales mecca. Soon Giles E. Hodges opened a small dealership between Withington and Breckenridge (later operating at several successive locations along Woodward; under new owners, now at Cambourne). Then, by 1925 he had formed a corporation, Hodges Auto Sales, selling Hudson-Essex autos. The Ferndale Buick Co. opened in 1928. Soon after, at the W. Drayton corner, Wetmore's had a Packard showroom.

The star salesman at Wallace-Hartman Chevrolet, George Higgins, bought out his employer, and in 1931 opened, at Woodward/W. Lewiston, a Pontiac agency--which was to become the state's largest Pontiac dealer, enduring for some four decades. In the early 1930s, on Woodward's east side, between Withington and 9 Mile, a DeSoto showroom was also in full operation. By 1932, "Hodges for Dodges" sold Dodges and Plymouths and, later, imports and trucks. Fern-Wood Chevrolet began operation, at the Woodward/Academy corner, in 1938. By 1942 Race Motor Sales had established a Chrysler/Plymouth agency, corner of Albany, and Slusser Motor Sales, between Webster and Fielding, was selling Hudsons. The Motor Mile had come of age. (*continued next page*)

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At the beginning of the 1940s, Ferndale had some 22,000 residents, many of them employed in the auto industry. A gallon of gas cost 19 cents. Chevrolet was first in car sales; Ford, second. (Cost of a car in 1942: about \$1,200.) The American love of cars was firmly in place, and, as the country emerged from the Depression, more people could afford them. But U.S. entry into World War II was to change drastically the role of auto dealers everywhere. As early as 1941, the auto industry had begun to gear for war production, and Detroit, ultimately the Arsenal of Democracy, ended car production and began producing planes, tanks, and all variety of armaments. Gas rationing soon limited driving only to necessary trips. (Initially, five gallons per week for “nonessential” driving, decreased to two gallons later; by 1943, the national speed limit was 35mph.)

Most local auto dealers nevertheless prevailed--by focusing on used car sales and emphasizing, in print and radio ads, “car maintenance by authorized dealers only.” At the end of the war a pent-up demand for new cars was anticipated and Ferndale dealers were ready to meet it. (Cost of a car in 1946: about \$1,500.) Surviving dealers on the Motor Mile included Fern-Wood Chevrolet (soon replaced by Floyd Foren Chevrolet), Higgins Pontiac, Hodges Auto Sales, and Race Motor Sales, joined by a new dealer, Raymond Motor Sales. By 1957, Gage Oldsmobile and Ray North Ford were added; Falvey Imports, by 1959; and Ed Schmid Ford (replacing Ray North), by 1962. The Motor Mile had been reenergized.

The Age of the Muscle Car, the 1960s, arrived, with power, speed, and creative design that became magnets for car sales on the Mile, especially for Ford and Chevrolet. (A 1966 Ford Mustang cost about \$2,500.) But by the 1970s, three major Motor Mile dealerships had left the city: Belcastro Pontiac (which had bought Higgins Pontiac), in 1972; Jack Cauley Chevrolet (which had replaced Floyd Foren), in 1978; and, in 1979, Falvey Imports (Volkswagen). In 2002, Fresard (Buick, Pontiac, GMC) took over the former Gage Oldsmobile showroom. Currently, six car dealerships operate on Woodward: two, Fresard and Ed Schmid, sell Big Three makes; and four, Ferndale Mazda, European Auto, Ferndale Honda, and Hodges (the oldest name on the Mile--now a Subaru dealership), sell imports.

Unique accomplishments of dealers on the Motor Mile in the past 90 years: George Higgins, owner of Higgins Pontiac, served three terms as a State Congressman and four terms as a State Senator. And Barbara J. Wilson, president of Ferndale Honda until 1996, was the first black automobile dealer in the world!

A telling sign of the times on the Motor Mile this very day: a Ford Mustang costs \$35,000.

Sources consulted: *Maurice Cole*, Ferndale of Yesteryear (*Ferndale Historical Society*, 1971): 113, 115. [Cole assigned the name “Motor Mile” to Woodward’s car dealership “strip.”] “A History of African-American New Car Dealers: The Pioneers--The Women,” Barbara Wilson (*Ann Arbor MI, Rustic Enterprise*), at <http://aacardealers.org/women.html>, retrieved 8-13-08. Larry Lankton, “Autos to Armaments: Detroit Becomes the Arsenal of Democracy,” *Michigan History Magazine*, Nov/Dec. 1991: 42-49 (*passim*). Carol Lawson, “Honoring 7 Who ‘Do and Do,’” *New York TIMES*, June 19, 1987, at <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html>, retrieved 8-12-08.

R. I. Polk Directories (*Ferndale*) for 1924, 1928, 1938, 1942, 1948, and 1957. V. Dennis Wrynn, *Detroit Goes to War: The American Automobile Industry in World War II* (*Osceola WI: Motorbooks International*, 1993): *passim*.

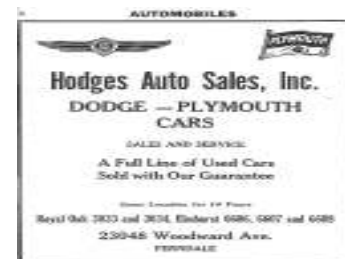
Note: Car prices quoted from author’s fond “memory.” Additional memories of Ferndale’s auto dealers of the past are welcome! Please call the Museum.



Ferndale’s second – and last – car dealership on Nine Mile, late 1920s



Tom O'Donoghue, Salesman Higgins Pontiac



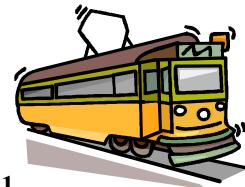
Hodges ad in the City Directory during World War II



Fernwood Chevrolet – 22346 Woodward Ave – ca. 1950s



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“MR. FERNDALE”¹: TOM O’DONOGHUE

The city officials who shaped Ferndale in the mid-20th Century often had biographies that straddled the American frontier and the Age of Henry Ford. Such was the history of Tom O’Donoghue (1889-1974) who, because of his 35 years of service, as City Clerk (23 years) and City Commissioner (12 years), remains one of the most revered civil servants in Ferndale history.

Born in Kansas and on his own at age 12, he was, early on, a drifter whose jobs included cow punching, peddling, streetcar conductor, and school teacher (in spite of little formal education). After service in World War I, he came to Detroit to work on the Ford assembly line and, in 1920, newly married, moved to a house on Albany in Ferndale. (According to his business card, see page 2, he also was a salesman at Higgins Pontiac for a time.) He was appointed City Clerk in 1933, then elected City Commissioner in 1957 (with the most votes ever received by a commissioner in the city’s history).

The city clerk position was “at first, a one man office paying little. Ferndale, as had most of its neighboring communities, had barely gotten organized, when the Depression hit and was struggling. The clerkship paid less than \$2,000 a year. Record keeping had been haphazard; O’Donoghue organized the vital service himself.”²

He is remembered as an able administrator, with both an “inborn gift for language which made him a popular figure at official functions”³ and a unique ability to deal with colleagues and constituents alike—even under the most trying circumstances. He is also recalled for his literary efforts, among them one he deemed “his favorite poem,” which he wrote to honor Ferndale and define what it means to be a citizen:

WHAT FERNDALE MEANS TO ME⁴

If you want to live in the kind of town
That’s the kind of a town you like,
You needn’t slip your things in a grip
And start off on a long, long, hike
For you’ll only find what you’ve left behind.
There’s nothing that’s really new,
A knock at your town is a knock at yourself
It isn’t your town it’s you!

Real towns are not made by men afraid
Lest somebody else gets ahead.
When everyone works and nobody shirks,
You can raise your town from the dead
And if while you make your personal stake
Your neighbor can make one, too,
Your town will be what you want to see.
It isn’t your town It’s you!

¹ Mayor Bruce Garbutt characterization of Tom O’Donoghue, quoted in Gary Schuster, “‘Golden Deeds Award for ‘Mr. Ferndale’,” Daily Tribune, May 18, 1968, n.p., [clipping] in Ferndale Historical Museum Archives. ² [Obituary] “Beloved Ferndale Figure, T.H. O’Donoghue Dead,” Daily Tribune, July 12, 1974, n.p., [clipping] in Ferndale Historical Museum Archives. ³ Ibid. ⁴ Typescript copy in Ferndale Historical Museum archives.

THE LITTLE HOUSE ON WOODWARD*

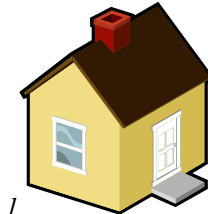
Bessie Whitley (later Pasfield) arrived in the territory that became Ferndale in July 1911. Her husband Harry Whitley, with a cousin and a friend, had arrived some time before and the three of them had built a small two-room house on the Granger property [location of the Granger Sawmill, a landmark business that milled logs for the planking of Woodward and the building of the Belle Isle Bridge]. The house was at the place which is now the gateway to Machpelah Cemetery, and stood in the midst of farmland and woods. Mrs. Whitley picked various berries and fruit in the vicinity of what is now Marshall. Severe storms at the time were frightening as she had not been accustomed to such severe storms in England.

The Whitley's was the only house on the east side of Woodward Avenue, a dirt road. They had to carry water from the pump on the Granger farm. To go to bed they climbed a step-ladder to the loft (the ladder was on the outside of the house). They paid \$7.00 rent per month for the seven acres on which the house stood. In 1912 the seven acres was offered to the Whitleys for purchase at \$700 per acre. They declined the offer and the property was later sold to the Machpelah Cemetery Company for \$18,000.

As luck would have it, neighbors Mr. and Mrs. Charles H. Silman [well-known Ferndale pioneers], who lived across Woodward near what is now Silman, offered to sell the Whitleys 50 feet of their extensive garden. The original little house was then moved across Woodward to the new location (what is now the 200 block), becoming the first house on Silman. By 1914 an addition to the structure had been completed, and the Whitleys had dug a well 130 feet deep. But the family still used oil lamps until 1915 when a second house was built on the street. (The Edison Company would not run a line for just one house.)

Harry Whitley died in 1916 "of an operation for appendicitis," and Mrs. Whitley moved to Highland Park in 1918. She returned to Ferndale in 1926, to live in a house on Edgewood Place, but with fond memories of her "little house on Woodward."

Summarized from an original typescript, "Ferndale History," Mrs. Bessie Pasfield [Whitley], undated, in Ferndale Historical Museum archives. Note: Mrs. Pasfield died March 20, 1975; she had lived in Ferndale for a total of 50 years.



EARLY LOCAL NICKNAMES IN FERNDALE

- "The Swamp"** When people said "the swamp" [in the 1920s and 1930s] they were referring to the east side of Ferndale.
- "Boom T"** This was the area, 9 1/2 Mile Rd. to Hilton to the city limits, the northeast area built after World War II.
- "Encampment"** The internment area at Harding Park where prisoners of war were held during World War II. [Yes, Ferndale really did house prisoners of war, as did the nearby State Fairgrounds.]

Source: Unattributed typescript, no date, in Ferndale Historical Museum archives.

Officers of the Ferndale Historical Society

<i>President</i>	Roger Schmidt	<i>Vice President</i>	Frank Flores
<i>Recording Secretary</i>	Christine Kole	<i>Treasurer</i>	Garry Andrews
<i>Corresponding Secretary</i>	Jean Spang	<i>Historian/Membership</i> Lynne Prudden	
<i>Communications/Publicity</i>	Garry Andrews	<i>Board of Directors:</i> Phyllis Hill, David Lungu, Eleanor Mielke, Mary White	
<i>Trustees:</i> Ray White; Robert Bruner, City Manager			

FERNDALE'S FAMOUS: WHITFIELD CONNOR, ACTOR



Whitfield Connor as recorded in the Lincoln Log (Lincoln High School Yearbook), 1935



Publicity shot, ca. 1950s, appearing in the Daily Tribune (undated issue in Museum archives)

A 1935 graduate of Lincoln High School, Whitfield Connor, whose family (the Mitchells) lived on W. Saratoga, became a successful actor on the stage, in the movies, and on TV. He got his professional start as a cast member of two well-known Detroit radio shows: the "Lone Ranger" and the "Hermit's Cave." After attending Wayne State University, acquiring a University of Michigan master's degree, and serving in World War II, he joined the renowned Maurice Evans' Shakespearian company, appearing in Detroit as Horatio in "Hamlet." He subsequently appeared in many roles on Broadway, was featured in "Tap Root" (1948) with Susan Hayward and Van Heflin, and appeared in many adventure films, including "The Prince of Pirates" (1953, with John Derek) and "The Saracen Blade" (1954, with Ricardo Montalban). He even had an uncredited role in "Butterfield 8" (1960) with Elizabeth Taylor. His many TV roles included those on "Dragnet" and regular appearances on the popular soap operas "Guiding Light" and "Another World." He was the long-time executive producer of the Elitch Theater in Denver. His career spanned some 50 years. He died in 1988.

Sources consulted: "Movie Role for Lincoln Graduate," Royal Oak Tribune, December 4, 1947;
"Whitfield Connor," www.answers.com/topic/whitfield-connor-36K, retrieved July 29, 2008; "Whitfield Connor,"
www.filmreference.com/film/60/whitfield-connor.html-5K, retrieved July 29, 2008.

NOTES FROM THE MUSEUM DIRECTOR

The Society has had unprecedented attention this summer--due to the many visitors to the museum during its increased hours of operation; the Society's booth on Nine Mile during the Dream Cruise; and the new website which has reached people all around the globe. Special thanks are due to the volunteers who helped prepare and man the booth during the 3-day Dream Cruise/Retrofest event. And a special welcome to new members of the Society, whose support has been indispensable. Summer hours at the museum have been so successful that they will be extended through the year: Mondays and Wednesday, 10am-1pm, Saturdays, 1pm-4pm, or by special appointment. (Please give 48 hours notice for special appointments.) Please check your memberships for renewal. We hope to see you at the museum soon!

Garry Andrews

SEPTEMBER, OCTOBER, AND NOVEMBER GOOD PHOTOGRAPHY WEATHER! **PROJECT FERNDALE ARCHITECTURE: VOLUNTEERS NEEDED!**

The photographing of Ferndale's some 8,000 structures--homes, businesses, churches, civic facilities, and schools--continues in earnest. Volunteers for this very important project are always welcome. Camera, film, and supplies are furnished by, and complete instructions are available from, the Historical Society. Contact **Phyllis Hill**, 248-548-5914.

THE FERNDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMORIAL BOARD

The following names appear on the Historical Museum’s Memorial Board, located to the left of the Museum entrance. Each name, inscribed on a brass plaque, represents a Ferndale resident that is fondly remembered by friends and relatives.*

Craig S. Aenis James B. Avery Alice (Auger) Beaudet Dorothy I. (Rowe) Beaudet Eugene Beaudet
Joseph Gerard A. Beaudet Lucien J. Beaudet Roger C. Beaudet Irving G. Beauplied Daniel Beens
Grace Beens Doris Gay Rice Bell Asa W. Bonnor Sr. Helen G. Bonner Andrew Bossory
Margaret Bossory Gerrit (Lefty) Brandt David “Bud” Brown Jean (Howie) Bruner
Reuben G. Bruner Beatrice (Pominville) Burkart Michael “Mike” Burkart Edward H. Calnen
Anne (McClelland) Corning Kevin B. Curtin Gordon Damon Mona Damon George Danek
Jessie Danek Enid (Baily) Poehlman DeTar John Michael Elmers Margaret (Moran) Elmers
Robert I. Elmers Sr. Merced “Joe” Flores Reverend John W. French Carl W. Forsythe
Bruce D. Garbutt Mildred F. Garbutt Charles J. Gerhard Barbara (Elmers) Golden Galen Earl Grant
Marilyn P. (Widman) Haeberle Elsie M. Harper Alexander Henderson
Margaret Ann (Mustard) Henderson Elsie (Tyrie) Hill Sidney G. Hill Robert L. Humphrey
Edgar D. Irwin Isabell M. Irwin Alice E. Johnson Irving L. Johnson Grace (Owen) Kantz
Guy V. Kantz Patrick (Beattie) Kelly Ethel H. Kinnane Walter C. Koppelman
Edward M. Kotlarek Gerry O. Kulick Leonard M. Kulick Wilfred A. Laking Bernie Lennon
Oscar R. Lindsay Frank T. Luxon Madeline Luxon John “Jack” McDaniel Rhea (Finch) McDaniel
Robert F. McDaniel Beatrice Mielke James Robert Mielke Theodore (Ted) Mielke
Robert Harmon Miller Norman Montpetit Sandra Curtis Oberdoorstan Nora Patnales
Theodore Patnales Victor Paul Bonnie (Williams) Petack Gilbert A. Purse Marguerite Purse
Marjorie Sue Rhodes Amber (Meech) Rodgers William J. Rodgers Charles “Chuck” Romig
Barbara (Blick) Sherman Charles M. Solley Hugh H. Squires Lois Jean (Koppelman) Squires
Opal D. (Meyers) Squires Marjorie (Flynn) Struthers Alexander A. Stuart, M.D.
Margaret (Green) Sweeten Nathan George Sweeten Robert “Bob” P. Thomas Jonathan A. Truxton
Bert S. VanGiesen Doris Irene VanGiesen Helen L. VanGiesen Newton C. Van Giesen
Charles Earle Wagner Eileen Elizabeth Wagner Elizabeth Mary Wagner Agnes (Peterson) Waugh
Roy Waugh Jack H. Webb David B. Whyte Floyd E. Williams Jr. Floyd E. Williams Sr.
Lillian Willams Gordon A. Wilson Margaret K. (Woodcraft) Wilson

* Please contact Phyllis Hill, 248-548-5914, if you would like to add a name to the Memorial Board. Charge of \$35 covers cost of plaque, inscription, and installation.

DO YOU HAVE A 1948 LINCOLN LOG THAT YOU WOULD BE WILLING TO DONATE TO THE MUSEUM FOR ITS COLLECTION OF LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL YEARBOOKS? ALL LHS GRADS AND THE MUSEUM STAFF WOULD BE GRATEFUL FOR YOUR CONTRIBUTION!



SOLVING THE MYSTERY OF WEST DRAYTON’S FIRST NAME

The Commission of the Village of Ferndale, March 10, 1920, officially recognized the U.S. Postal Service’s renaming of a number of Ferndale’s street names to differentiate them from those in Detroit. “Park Boulevard” in northwest Ferndale thus became “West Drayton.” An even earlier name for West Drayton, preceding Park Boulevard, has been identified by Society member, **Karen Breen-Bondie**, who has a map of the Woodland Park Subdivision (Royal Oak Township, Oakland County) dating to 1914 which indicates the street was called **Elmdale**, a logical name considering the number of vintage elms which still align the street. A copy of the map is now located in the Museum’s archives, and a grateful thank-you is extended to Ms. Breen-Bondie for bringing this aspect of Ferndale history up to date.

WHO SAYS MUSEUM STAFFS ARE BORING?

The quarter century existence of the Ferndale Historical Museum is owed to the dedicated work of many volunteers who have come from an array of occupational backgrounds. But probably one of the most unique occupational histories of the Museum's current staff is that of its new director, **Garry Andrews**.

A native of Oshawa, Ontario, Garry recently retired from a dual career--as a nurse and an entertainer. Garry's father was a singer and guitarist who performed in various Ontario venues and on the radio in Oshawa and nearby Ajax. In the 1950s he "drafted" Garry and two nephews as his backup singers for teen party performances. As the "Ajax Boys," they traveled all over the province, singing the best of Country and Western, Doo Wop, and Motown sounds. Garry still managed to graduate from nurses training, pursued a 30-year career as a nurse and administrator of several 501C3 organizations, and moved to the States--while still performing regularly as an entertainer, including stints as an impersonator in Las Vegas.

Now retired from his two careers, Garry joined the Ferndale Historical Museum staff one year ago. His organizational skills, attention to detail, creative ideas, and abiding interest in local history make him an invaluable addition to the Museum's staff. And what other known museum is honored with a director who has the professional ability to replicate the choreographed stage moves of the Temptations and other music icons?



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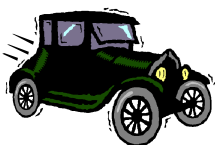


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Watchin' and Waitin' – 7am, Saturday, August 16th, 2008
Garry Andrews, Ferndale Historical Society booth,
awaits the first Dream Cruisers of the day

HISTORY MEETS THE RETROFEST AND DREAM CRUISE 2008

The Historical Society's booth at the combined Retrofest and Dream Cruise and celebrations, August 15-17, was in operation for a total of 31 hours over the three days. Three panels featuring photos of significant scenes from Ferndale history, assembled for Dream Cruise 2007 by **Michael Lary** (Chamber of Commerce) and produced by **Great Wall**, again served as the booth's backdrop, an eye-catching focal point for passersby. Ferndale-themed T-shirts, copies of photos from Ferndale history, Ferndale "postcards," books about Ferndale, and even models of classic cars (ready for assembly) attracted buyers and browsers alike--and inspired countless reminiscences of former days. Society members and friends who staffed the booth included **Garry Andrews, Dan Harteau, Lisa Harteau, Colleen Kelly, David Lungu, Diane O'Neill, Lauren Roberts, Roger Schmidt, Jean Spang, Lothar Spang, Geoff Spencer, Mary White, Ray White, and Jeff Taylor**. Sincere thanks are extended to each of these volunteers--and to everyone who visited the booth. Such support ensured that Society and City participation in the Retrofest and Dream Cruise 2008 was an outstanding success.



Please Look Inside!

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CALENDAR

- Thursday, Sept. 25, 6pm** **Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum**
Thursday, Oct. 23, 6pm **Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum**
Thursday, Nov. 20, 6pm **Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum**
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The Crow's Nest, Fall 2008

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