



# The Crow's Nest

*"Preserving the heritage of Ferndale for future generations"*

**NEWSLETTER OF THE FERNDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

FALL 2009

## **MAGIC WAS SQUARE: PLAYGROUNDS IN MID-20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY FERNDALE**

*Sharon Kaiser*

The streets of Ferndale were teeming with kids in the 1950s. According to the 1954 school census, 4,350 children aged 1-5 lived in the Ferndale School District. By the early 1950s the city had been built up to such an extent that there was little available green space for playgrounds. Kids often took to the streets for their ball games and other sports. Civic leaders, along with city and school officials, became increasingly concerned about the lack of play-space for Ferndale's young residents.

Because little space was available to create play areas, members of the city's Recreation Advisory Committee and its Director, Bud Brown, had to come up with a way of making the most use of limited resources. The Committee devised the idea of a year-round, multi-purpose, fenced, lighted, and curbed 120-foot cement-based square that could be marked and lined for various games. During warmer months games such as tennis, badminton, volleyball, hop-scotch, shuffleboard, and basketball could be played; at night, teen-age dances and square dances for adults could be held. During winter months the square could be flooded for ice-hockey and ice-skating. Ruth Romig, who served on the Committee, recalls, "The name we hit upon [for these areas] was an eye-catcher: MAGIC, I said, SQUARE, said the others."\*

The goal of the Recreation Advisory Committee was to build four squares and two half-squares (60' x 120') throughout Ferndale. In 1955 a community drive for funds was launched. Everyone got into the act, from Boy Scouts and school-aged children to adults, business leaders, PTA groups, service clubs, and industries. A model of the Magic Square was taken to meetings and displayed while the pitch for funds was given. John W. Armstrong of the Darin & Armstrong Construction Co. underwrote the cost of the first Magic Square, located in Roosevelt Park (now Geary Park).

Ultimately, the community came up with the \$45,000 needed for the whole program, which took 10 years to complete. Magic Squares were located in Roosevelt, Wilson, Harding, Garbutt, Mapledale, and Wanda parks and were in use for over twenty years. They all were then converted to tennis courts, then to basketball courts, and most recently to roller rinks. (Continued on Page 2)



Magic Square Playground Plan, 1955.  
Designer, Leonard Keller; Bud Brown,  
Recreation Director, Ruth Romig, Chairman,  
Financial campaign.  
Photo : *Courtesy Daily Tribune, Jan 13, 1955*



Skating on a Ferndale Magic Square, 1968  
Photo: *Courtesy Ferndale Gazette, Jan 4, 1968*

In the 20-year history of the Magic Squares, there was one tragedy: On June 17, 1955, a 10-year-old Pleasant Ridge boy, Robert Chambers Jr., was killed when he and his younger sister were watching workmen at Roosevelt Park lay the surface for the first square. The driver of an asphalt truck did not see the children, backed up, and hit Bobby--who was instantly killed. In place of flowers for his funeral, Bobby's parents requested that donations be made to the Magic Square Program or to his church. A plaque in memory of Bobby was located by the square in Roosevelt Park for years; it soon will have a permanent home in the Ferndale Historical Museum

Ferndale was one of the first in the country to come up with the Magic Square concept. The city received inquiries from all over the U.S. asking for information and plans.

Through generosity and hard work, Ferndale's citizenry came together and created magic for all to enjoy.

\*Source quoted: Ruth Romig, in Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, Gerry Kulick (Ed.), *Old Timers Tell It Like It Was* (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 154

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### FERNDALE'S MEMORIAL ART, 1955: THE CHAMBERS MURAL

*Sharon Kaiser*

The large mural, "Christ Teaching" (also called "Suffer the Little Children" in some sources), located on the west wall of the Drayton Avenue Presbyterian (Pinecrest/Drayton) baptistery, is an example of little-known memorial art work in the city. It was painted by Duane Perrigo, in memory of his grandson by marriage, Robert Chambers Jr., who was killed in June 1955 during the construction of the Magic Square at Roosevelt Park, the first of Ferndale's Magic Square playgrounds.

An award-winning mural artist based in Chicago, Perrigo worked on various mural projects in Detroit's public buildings, theaters, and churches, and was especially known for scenic mural wall papers. In September 1955, while the architect and the Drayton Avenue Presbyterian Church Arts and Decoration Committee were still in the planning stages for the new church addition (completed 1958), Perrigo offered to paint the Chambers memorial mural on any subject of their choice.

The resulting work, for which two children from Drayton, Suzanne and Elizabeth Sandling (pictured to the left, holding the woman's hands), and several neighborhood children, posed as models, has remained a focal point of Drayton's north transept despite changing uses of the area over the years—and holds a special place as an outstanding example of memorial art work in Ferndale.

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Source: Archives Committee, Drayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, *Drayton Dimensions in Time, 1924-2004: The Story of Drayton Avenue Presbyterian Church*, September 2004: 33-34.



Drayton Avenue Presbyterian Church, Mural by Duane Perrigo  
Photo: Victor Paul

### So You Think You Know Ferndale?

1. When was Ferndale first incorporated as a city?
2. How many elementary schools did Ferndale have in the 1940s?
3. What was the name of the old high school in Ferndale?
4. What was the old name of West Drayton Avenue?
5. Who was the first mayor of Ferndale?
6. What was the first name of Woodward Avenue?
7. What was the name of the first church in Ferndale?
8. Who was the first woman to own a business in Ferndale?
9. What year did the Ferndale Library open?
10. Did Ferndale ever have any Civil war veterans?

For the answers to these questions please turn to page 5.

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### HISTORICAL BOOKS FOR SALE AT THE MUSEUM

FERNDALE OF YESTERYEAR <i>By Maurice F. Cole</i>	\$25.00
OLD TIMERS TELL IT LIKE IT WAS <i>By Ruth Rogers Elemers, June Waugh Kotlarek, Gerry Kulick</i>	\$15.00
TOUGH AS NAILS: A HISTORY OF THE FERNDALE FIRE DEPT. <i>By Chief Roger Schmidt</i>	\$36.00

These items may be purchased at the Historical Museum in person or requested by mail for small shipping & handling fee of \$5.00. Checks should be made out to: Ferndale Historical Society, 1651 Livernois, Ferndale, MI 48220



City Employees About 1933

City Commission seated at table on the right

Gordon McKissen standing in aisle (second from right)

*Donated by Mrs. Stella McKissen*

## Ferndale Honors "Caesar of the Pacific"

*Lynne Prudden*

On Friday, May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1952 General Douglas MacArthur spoke to the people of Ferndale. The area in the center of Woodward, just North of Nine mile was sectioned off and set up with amplifiers so everyone would be able to hear this most famous war hero general. He was welcomed by Mayor Garbutt and Introduced by Carl W. Forsythe to many of Ferndale's dignitaries. Many people came to see this great general who never grew tired, lost courage, or lost faith in his men.

General MacArthur graduated from West Point with the highest honors of anyone to come out of the Military Academy. He held the rank of Colonel, chief of staff, and commander of the Rainbow Division during World War I. He was superintendent of West Point in 1919; in 1922 he was sent to the Philippines again. In 1930 President Hoover made him chief of staff and a full general. General MacArthur retired in 1937 at the age of 72, but was recalled to active duty by President Roosevelt to be commander of the United States Army in the East. During World War II, he ran one of the greatest offensive campaigns of all time. He believed deeply in his God, his country, and his men. He told them just that and they loved him and believed in him. General MacArthur's philosophy seemed to emanate from some deep and mysterious reservoir, ever kindled with hope, patriotism, and nobility, a true characteristic of the world's greatest leaders. Ferndale was privileged to greet and honor so great a dignitary and so famous a general who always managed to pluck victory from the jaws of defeat!

Source: The Ferndale Gazette, May 15, 1952

Photo courtesy: Bob Thomas



General Douglas MacArthur, wife Jean Marie & son, Arthur.

Courtesy: Joan Stefanski

*Photo credit to Bob Thomas*



General Douglas MacArthur

Courtesy: Joan Stefanski

*Photo Credit to Bob Thomas*

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## Ferndale Museum Wish List

1. Photographers to photograph Ferndale houses
  2. Biographies of our venerable residents
  3. A new building to house our growing Museum
  4. Monetary Donations -- we are self-sustaining
  5. Items from your Ferndale attic that might be historical
  6. Any St. James year books
  7. New ideas to make our Museum special
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Dear Society Member,

I would like to thank you for your continued generous support of the Ferndale Historical Society and Museum. This note is to inform you that membership dues are now due as of September 30, 2009 for the year 2010. Please be sure to check that your dues are up to date. This will insure continued delivery of your newsletter. For your convenience we have included a membership form. Please fill out the form and return it to museum so we can update our records and to be sure that your membership does not lapse.

Thank you and warm regards,  
Garry Andrews  
Museum Director



**Ferndale Historical Society**  
**Operators of the Ferndale Historical Museum**

**MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION**

Individual \$ 10.00  
Family \$ 25.00  
Lifetime \$100.00

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Return to: Ferndale Historical Society  
1651 Livernois  
Ferndale, MI 48220

**Officers of the Ferndale Historical Society**

<i>President</i>	Roger Schmidt	<i>Board of Directors</i>	David Lungu
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<i>Historian/Membership</i>	Lynne Prudden		Robert Bruner, City Manager
<i>Communications/Publicity</i>	Garry Andrews		

**ANSWERS TO: So You Think You Know Ferndale**

1. The Village of Ferndale was incorporated in 1918 and became a city in 1927.
2. There were 10 elementary schools in the 1940s in Ferndale.
3. The name of the old high school was Lincoln High School.
4. West Drayton was once called Park Blvd.
5. The first mayor of Ferndale was called a manager and his name was Carl H. Peterson.
6. Woodward Avenue was once called Saginaw Trail.
7. The first church (1917) in Ferndale was called "The Tabernacle" at 9 Mile & Bermuda.
8. Mary Ann Chappell owned a tavern; people called her "Mother Handsome". The tavern was located at Woodward and Oakridge in the 1830s.
9. The Ferndale library opened its doors in 1930.
10. Yes, his name was Francis Stockman, a Union soldier; he lived at 235 Cambourne and died in 1938.

## THE PIANO

*Roger schmidt*

In February of 1944, the department decided to get rid of the piano that was in the living quarter at the Headquarters Fire Station. The piano has been a fixture for eighteen years, since the days of George Smith. A deal was brokered with a salesman names Whitney Smart for the price of ten bucks.

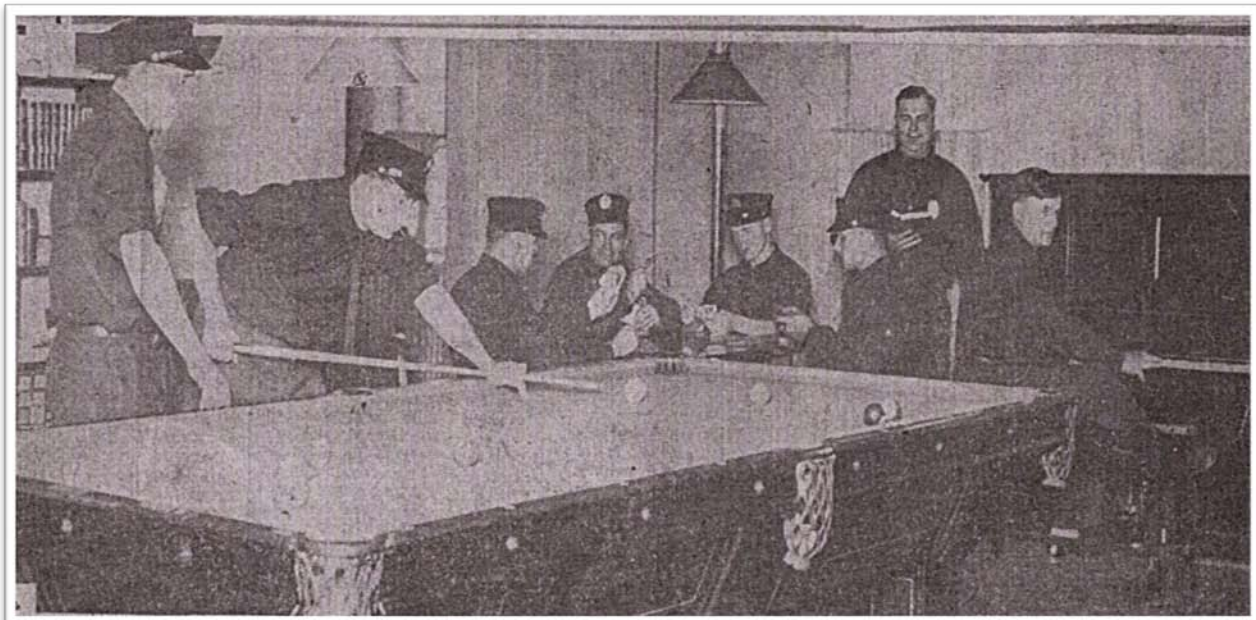
As the station had been added onto and the stairway took on a few new twists, the piano had been moved from room to room. As part of the sales agreement the firemen were required to move the piano from the second floor to the first and out to a waiting van. The men were willing but none of them had given any thought to the matter until they hit the first turn on the stairs. There the piano got stuck and had to be hauled back up. Next they tried a “gin Pole” (A single standing pole angled over the load and supported by guy ropes. A hoisting rope or block and tackle is attached at the top.) When they tried to erect it on the main floor it proved to be too long and then too short to reach from a lower level. They looked at the windows but they were too narrow. The situation had Chief Norman Pritchard and several bystanders laughing uncontrollably, and Smart looking for a bottle of aspirin.

A professional piano mover was called. He took one look at the piano, another look at the stairway with its bends and said as he was leaving, “I’ve been moving pianos for 20 years, but I know when I’m licked. I give up.”

The chief, who had calmed down by now, looked at the men and said, “let’s take it apart.” Smart agreed and the men grabbed their screwdrivers and wrenches. In a matter of minutes everything that could be removed was, and all that was left were the ends and sides, which were glued together. Once more they headed down the stairs, only to get stuck again. One of them gave a hard tug at a leg and the rest of the frame fell apart. The pieces were carried down and laid in a pile. With a scratch of their heads, the men began to reassemble the piano but nothing fit. One by one they gave up and walked away.

Smart tried in vain to sell it back for one dollar, but got no takers. As he left to get more aspirin and someone to put the piano back together, one of the men handed him the piano stool the only thing still in one piece, and said, “you’ll need this when you are learning to play this piano like a harp.”

Source: *Daily Tribune, Special Servicemen’s Edition, 2-21-44*



*THE PIANO (in the background)*

*Courtesy: The Daily Tribune*

## FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW: Ferndale's Fire Department



1920 LaFrance pumper – circa 1922  
Source: *Historical Society Collection*



1936 Chevrolet Coupe, Chief's car with Chief Donald Post.  
Source: *Roger Schmidt Collection*



1965 Cadillac ambulance and 1958 Pontiac ambulance  
Source: *Roger Schmidt Collection*



1996 Pierce Pumper, September 2003  
Source: *Gasper Bommarito photo*

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*Calendar of Events:*

Thursday, November 19	6 pm	Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome
Thursday, January 28	6 pm	Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome
Thursday, February 25	6 pm	Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome

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