



The Crow's Nest

NEWSLETTER OF THE FERNDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Spring 2015

THE MUSKIE BAY FIRE: A NIGHT TO REMEMBER

*Roger Schmidt**

Firefighters have a unique perspective on local history. They often are active participants in events that forever change landscapes and sometimes lives. One such event was what came to be called the “Muskie Bay Fire” at 23322 Woodward in 1975. Muskie Bay was a leather goods store, which like its immediate neighbors, the Smoke House (seller of records, tapes, and stereos) and the Zipper Boutique & Haberdashery (a clothing store), was a tenant in a commercial building located on Woodward’s east side in the block between E. Maplehurst and E. Woodland in Ferndale. Ironically, this now legendary fire happened just a week and a half short of three years since a mother and daughter died in a fire in their apartment—located above a commercial space in the same building.

On Saturday January 25th 1975, Smoke House manager Gordon Anderson was working late at the back of his store. While answering a phone call, he turned and saw smoke coming rapidly through the floor in the store’s front, causing him to nearly pass out from smoke inhalation. But he managed to exit out the back door and quickly, at 10:55pm, call the fire department from a nearby home.

When firemen arrived, the building was nearly obscured by smoke. They determined the fire was in the basement and made their way to the stairs, where they were greeted by heavy smoke boiling up to meet them. The smoke was “voluminous,” according to Fire Chief William McMurray, and flames, fed by the large amount of stock stored there by the three businesses, were rolling across the entire basement toward his men. As the men backed out of the basement, the fire broke through the ceiling and quickly spread to a one-

story section located at the building’s rear and reaching the roof. Fireman John Tyner said that at one point a hole was cut in the floor of one of the stores and a Baker Cellar Pipe, a tool capable of delivering 300 gallons of water per minute, was inserted to attack the fire from above, but seemed to have no effect on the flames.

Smoke conditions made visibility extremely difficult. Captains Doyme Easterwood and Milton Bruce went to the roof of the one-story section to check on the extent of the fire. Easterwood was leading the way when he disappeared from Milt’s view. As he had plunged downward, Doyme had grabbed a roof beam to stop his fall—and possible death. He hit hard, but a split-second later he felt himself being pulled upward. Milt had



Snow falls at the height of the battle, January 25, 1975. Hose lines, air packs and tools clutter the street as the aerial shoots water overtop, Muskie Bay, 23320 Woodward. Photo: Dick Hunt, courtesy of *Daily Tribune*.



The next day, January 26, 1975, what a mess. 1960 Ford Service Truck stands guard. Photo: Dick Hunt, courtesy of *Daily Tribune*.

reached down through the smoke and grabbed at the last spot where he had seen Doyne, managing to find Doyne's coat, giving a big tug, and pulling him from the hole.

One by one firefighters fell victim to the smoke. Alone and in pairs, sometimes helped by other firemen, they staggered to the street in search of oxygen. Engineers manning the rigs saw them coming, grabbed oxygen bottles from the truck compartments, and met them. Coughing, choking, and sometimes throwing up, firemen collapsed or sat down by the trucks and gulped air. Then, knowing that others were still taking a beating, they waded back into the fight for more punishment.

Fireman Gasper Bommarito recalled that "it was a strange kind of night. The smoke was very heavy and it just hung there. It wouldn't move and you couldn't get away from it and catch your breath. You had to walk fifty yards away to find any fresh air to breath. Everyone was getting sick." The only good thing about the smoke was that it kept spectators back at a safe distance.



Firefighters in close, trying to make headway: (L-to-R) Unknown, John Grey, Charlie Yodhes (by the ladder), Gasper Bommarito (on the nozzle), Lt. Roy Scrimger (trying to get some air after taking a look inside). Photo: Dick Hunt, courtesy of *Daily Tribune*.

The smoke would take its toll on the men before the night was over. In all, fourteen Ferndale firefighters would need medical treatment, one was admitted to the hospital. Treated at the scene were Lieutenant William Reed and firefighters Donald Furze, Bill Briggs, Gregory Horan, John Tyner, and Jack Holland. Treated at William Beaumont Hospital for smoke inhalation and burns: Captain Milton Bruce and firefighters Paul Ball, Ronald Pulford, Raymond Keevan, and Dave Pement. Firemen treated at the hospital for other injuries: Kenneth Heilig, an eye injury; and Gary Lohmeier, admitted to the hospital for smoke inhalation and listed in "satisfactory" condition.

Before the blaze was controlled at the three stores around 2am, Chief McMurray had to call in off-duty firefighters, bring all the department's equipment to the scene, and ask Royal Oak's Fire Department to stand-by at headquarters. At the fire's peak, ten 2½-inch hose lines (totaling 3,650 feet), three 3-inch lines (totaling 750 feet), and six 1½-inch lines (totaling 950 feet) were in use. Some 524,500 gallons of water were pumped into the building and onto the fire, which totally destroyed the one-story rear portion and the floors of two stores which collapsed into the basement.

Subsequent investigation by Fire Inspector Ken Galbraith prompted him to label the Muskie Bay Fire as "suspicious"—because the fire had spread so quickly, had started in or near a bookcase in the center of the basement directly under the Smoke House, and a half-filled gasoline can was found under the Zipper. But all the people associated with the businesses denied ownership of the gas can or knowing anything about it. Galbraith also noted that at some point a heating oil fuel line ruptured, emptying the contents of the tank into the building's basement and feeding the fire. Also the fire was reported at 10:55pm, yet people coming and going into the businesses between 10 and 10:30pm did not notice anything. Galbraith's conclusion was that "there was no time for a build-up of that intensity."

The outcome: Second-floor apartments had smoke and water damage, but the three stores were destroyed. Eventually the whole building was torn down due to extensive fire damage, which was estimated at well over \$120,000.

Today, the former location of 23322 Woodward is once again a largely commercial block. The Muskie Bay Fire of 1975, however, remains a legend in Ferndale history, a cautionary tale for firefighters, business owners, and local residents alike.

**Editor's Note/Sources: Roger Schmidt was Chief of the Ferndale Fire Department (2004-2010); this account of the Muskie Bay Fire is adapted from his book Tough as Nails: A History of the Ferndale Fire Department (Ferndale Historical Society, 2004): 140-149. Newspaper sources consulted: The Daily Tribune, 3-19-1975; The Detroit News, 1-27-1975; The Ferndale Gazette, 1-30-1975.*

FINGERPRINTS AND MORE: EARLY FERNDALE FROM A 1939 PERSPECTIVE*

1923 was somewhat of a banner year as in this year the city petitioned for and won the Post Office. Also in this year the first criminal was captured through the application of the Finger Print check-up method. This was accomplished by Chief of Police George W. Smith, and the offender was the young man who robbed the homes of Ed Hyland, Ed Beaucamp, the stores of the C.F. Smith Company, the Kroger Company, and the tool room of the St. James Catholic Church. The criminal left his finger prints on a putty knife and on a window sill.

On June 18, 1923 the Ferndale Gazette issued its first publication and has been a growing Home Town newspaper ever since.

From this time on [1923] the village grew rapidly, until in 1927 it was incorporated as the City of Ferndale, with a population of some 18,000--and was one of the most flourishing cities in Michigan, with many organizations for the enjoyment and social life of its residents.

The principal enterprises of Ferndale have been merchandising and by the year 1930 it was serving a population of some 20,853 and boasts over 35 service stations and 41 stores selling meats, groceries and milk. Our fair city survived the nation-wide depression with an honorable financial record, ranking high among the cities of our nation, and today has attained a population of some 22,000 neighbors living together peaceably and enjoying the blessings of this life with their families.

Listen to this: it rates highest of any city in the United States in children per capita family—having 3.93 children per family.

**Source: Summarized from "History of the City of Ferndale," uncredited manuscript in the Ferndale Historical Museum Archives, published in the Ferndale Gazette, 1939.*

JUDGE HOOLEY'S TAKE ON EARLY FERNDALE*



Crow's Nest and Hooley Real Estate Office, c. 1917, northeast corner of Nine Mile at Woodward. Photo: Ferndale Historical Society collection.

T. Frank Hooley became the Village of Ferndale's first Justice of the Peace in 1917. In 1963 while living in Alpena, he wrote a "statement of Ferndale history" which defined his memories of his earliest days in Ferndale.

When I came here in 1915 I had quit the shop, tool making business, and met Al Andersen [local real estate agent and sheriff who had an office at the n.e. Woodward/Nine corner and who in 1917 was killed by a burglar]. All the frontage on Woodward Avenue was vacant except C.F. Smith, who had a grocery store on the north side of Woodward. On the south side of Nine Mile Road there was a school house. The building on the north east corner became the real estate office owned by T. Frank Hooley who had the first Detroit telephone in Ferndale: Hemlock 2-847.

There was a crow's nest in the middle of Woodward and Nine Mile for directing traffic. The first police officer in Ferndale was hired when

Ferndale was still a charter and not even a city. Ferndale was the first village in the United States who voted for Women Suffrage at the same time they voted for a charter.

Ferndale received the first American flag for going over the top in the first Liberty Loan Drive during the first World War. Senator James Couzens came before Judge Hooley and was charged for speeding through town at 35 miles per hour. Senator Couzens then became instrumental for Ferndale going over the top in the Liberty Loan Drive by buying \$2,000 worth of Liberty Loan Bonds and the case was dismissed. State Governor Ferris presented Judge Hooley with the flag.

McCall's Lumber Company was located east of Woodward near Ardmore Street and there were large oak trees nearby and interurban streetcars. The interurbans were taken out when Governor Groesbeck created Woodward Avenue and had Woodward paved.

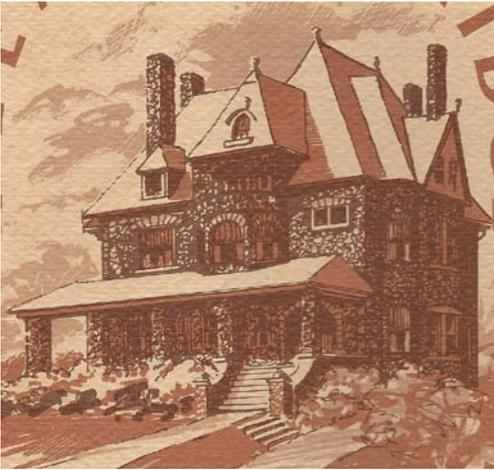
**Source: Summarized from typewritten manuscript "Ferndale History"[p.1], by Judge T. Frank Hooley, Alpena, Michigan, on file, Library Collection, Ferndale Historical Museum Archives.*

BEFORE I-696 WOODWARD AT TEN MILE, 1920s*

It was unusual in the early 20s to see more than one car a day on Ten Mile where we lived. The road extended west to deeper ruts and often it became foggy from the burning peat bogs. Sometimes the air was so thick with smoke it was necessary to walk in front of the car to keep it on the road. Information on steering was called back to the driver.

*Source: [Ferndale resident] Mary Liskow, in *Old Timers Tell It Like It Was*, Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, and Gerry Kulick (ed.), (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 70.

THE WILCOX CASTLE: WOODWARD/TEN MILE LANDMARK, 1920s*



Wilcox Castle, on west side of Woodward, between Ten Mile and Poplar Park, built in 1854, demolished 1928. Photo: sketch from *Pleasant Ridge, Then and Now*, Pleasant Ridge Historical Commission (1981).

Alfred F. Wilcox, a lawyer and real estate developer, acquired 160 acres on the west side of Woodward just south of Ten Mile in 1894, and built a stately residence three-stories high on a slight rise on Woodward between Ten Mile and Poplar Park [now a park area just south of I-696 and the Zoo]. Its cut-stone masonry, slate roof, and heavy plate glass windows, and cupolas, dormers, and spires made it an imposing local landmark, familiar to Ferndale residents. West of the house was a large barn for livestock and racehorses—and a race track. His small “pavilion” near Ridge Road was used for band concerts and Fourth of July celebrations. Mr. Wilcox died in 1921. The residence became an office space until 1928 when it was demolished to make way for the Wilcox Subdivision of homes. Stones from the Wilcox house were used in the construction of the house at 15 Millington, serve today as a small curved “fence” at the intersection of Ridge Road and Oxford just north of Roosevelt School; and a small stone pile in the park near Ten Mile recalls the former grandeur of the Wilcox estate.

*Sources consulted and summarized: Paul Bluemle (writer) and Pleasant Ridge Historical Commission (researchers), *Pleasant Ridge, Then and Now* (Pleasant Ridge Historical Commission, Pleasant Ridge Michigan Publishers, 1981): 33. Additional information on current location of stones supplied by the Pleasant Ridge Historical Commission, 2015.

WHY DOES LIVERNOIS END AT OAKRIDGE?*

The creation of superhighways preoccupied state and federal traffic engineers in the 1920s. One early plan for Michigan was to construct a route north from the Ambassador Bridge and on through Ferndale, Pleasant Ridge, Royal Oak and Rochester and then on to Bay City.

By 1922 Ferndale officials had started legal work to prepare Livernois from Eight Mile to Oakridge as part of this proposed route, expecting that Livernois would soon be extended beyond Oakridge in Ferndale and on through Pleasant Ridge to connect with points north. Objections from Pleasant Ridge residents and officials were immediate, claiming that traffic, harm to the “rural atmosphere,” and the expense of hiring a traffic officer would be detrimental to their village.

By 1925 the dispute between Pleasant Ridge and Ferndale had reached Lansing and even the Governor could not settle it. Attempts in 1930 to reach cooperative agreements between Oakland and Wayne counties failed, as did further intervention by the State in 1933, when Pleasant Ridge again objected. By 1935 hearings in Lansing on the matter attracted some 150 citizens, including a number of Ferndale residents, who were against the opening of Livernois through Pleasant Ridge. So ended the idea of continuing Livernois past Oakridge in Ferndale and on to the north through Pleasant Ridge and beyond.

*Source consulted/summarized: Paul Bluemle (writer) and The Pleasant Ridge Historical Commission (researchers), *Pleasant Ridge, Then and Now*, (Pleasant Ridge Historical Commission, Pleasant Ridge Historical Commission Publishers, 1981): 30.

THE LAWSUIT AGAINST THE FERNDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY, 2013-2014

It started innocently enough in July 2013. Robert McGee, a former Ferndale Mayor (1992-1994), appeared at the Historical Museum and announced that he planned to write a book about Ferndale history. The book was to be published by the Arcadia Publishing Co., already well-known locally for its release of histories of nearby Oak Park, Clawson, and Detroit, and cities nation-wide.

Accordingly, Garry Taylor, Society President/Museum Director, introduced Mr. McGee to museum volunteer Jean Spang, a retired university press editor of scholarly books and articles. Spang and McGee discussed the plan for the book, agreeing that she would be a co-author. Taylor and Spang then met with the former mayor to outline the fees, copyright requirements, and rules for use of museum archives as set forth in the museum's Constitution and By-Laws.

Mr. McGee seemed puzzled that requirements such as fees were necessary. But it was explained to him that the Society/Museum is a 501(c)(3) enterprise, supported only by memberships, donations, and the sale of books, afghans, coffee mugs, photos, house plaques, and other "souvenirs" of Ferndale. It was emphasized that the City's involvement in the museum is limited to payment of its water bill and occasional building repairs. (The Museum is a city-owned building.) Spang and McGee then proceeded to select several photos from museum archives that would be sent to Arcadia as samples, and a schedule was agreed upon for his next visit to the museum.

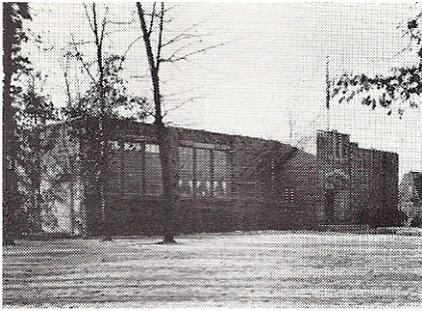
McGee did not appear for the first scheduled work day and made no call to tell the staff that he would not be present. But he showed up a day or so later, contract in hand for Spang to sign (which she did). Several days later McGee arrived unannounced and, in the presence of Taylor, Spang, and volunteer Jan Froggatt (a retired librarian), began questioning in detail the museum's financial status and reasons for rules—which were once again explained to him, as were the services offered and the expenses necessary to provide them (such as relevant technologies, computers and related equipment, archival paper and preservation supplies, and appropriate storage facilities). Unconvinced that payment should be required for the use of the museum's photo collection in the production of the book (for which some 200 photos would be necessary), he then argued with Taylor over the issue and ultimately questioned the whole management of the museum. Witnesses Spang and Froggatt became intimidated by McGee's increasingly negative attitude. As a result, Spang terminated her participation in the project. McGee later attended a Board meeting where he reiterated his plans to publish the book. The Board then voted not to cooperate in its writing, given his ongoing lack of respect for museum requirements.

Several weeks later the Society was presented with a lawsuit. McGee alleged tortious interference with his book and misuse of funds in the administration of the museum. The volunteer staff were then subjected to trips to Oakland County Circuit Court, depositions in lawyers' offices, copying of reams of documents substantiating museum fees and rules, and finally a trip to 1 Woodward Ave., Detroit, for an arbitration session. The case was dismissed October 7, 2014 on the agreement that the Ferndale Historical Society would not countersue. McGee was required to pay half of the arbitration expenses. The case cost the Society's volunteers untold stress and thousands in attorney fees, which the Board is now trying to recoup. But, thanks to diligent lawyers Darryl Paquette, Colleen Kelly-Paquette, and Joe McGill (Spang's personal attorney), the Society prevailed.

The Board of Directors has reviewed every aspect of the Society's Constitution and By-Laws and determined that, given the continuing support of Society members and the dedication of volunteers, the Museum—with its necessary rules and fees intact—will endure as a viable historical resource for Ferndale residents, visitors, and scholarly researchers alike.

A heartfelt thank-you to everyone who was so supportive of the Society through the entire process!

*Board of Directors,
Ferndale Historical Society*



Grant School, 21131 Garden Lane.
Photo: Learn to Live and Live to Learn,
Ferndale Public Schools, Edgar Down
superintendent (n.d.).

GLIMPSES OF FORMER DAYS

GRANT SCHOOL REACHES OUT, APRIL 1984*

A contest idea in Weekly Reader, suggested to staff by Kathy Blake, led to the recent release of 270 helium-filled balloons by the Grant student body. To date, 31 responses have been received—many from Ohio; others from as far away as Chesapeake Bay, Maryland. Weekly Reader will give \$500 to the school which launched the balloon that traveled the farthest. Grant staff and students already feel like winners with the contacts they have made. They even made the paper in Wellesville, Ohio.

**Source: "Staff Scene: For and About the Ferndale School Family," (Publication Office: Ferndale Public Schools), Vol. II, No.6 (April 1984): 2.*

DOPE ON KENSINGTON, 1938*

July 11, 1938, a patch of marihuana was discovered by Ferndale police at 666 Kensington avenue and destroyed by agents of the Federal Narcotics Bureau Friday morning. Police Captain Roy Butcher and Det. Sgt. Herman Fern came upon the plants by accident Thursday morning during an investigation of some chicken coops in the neighborhood.

Samples of the weed were taken back to police headquarters and the Federal Narcotics Bureau was notified. Upon their arrival in Ferndale men examined the samples and pronounced them unmistakably marihuana. This is the first to be reported in Ferndale.

Accompanied by Ferndale police, the government men drove to the place where the plant had been found. The ground was gone over carefully, all the marihuana was uprooted, thrown into a pile and burned.

Mrs. Helen Benesh of 666 Kensington avenue, who had planted the marihuana seeds, told investigators that she had no idea the seeds, given to her by a Detroit friend, were harmful.

Smaller sprouts of the plant were found across the street at the home of Mrs. LaVere Leonard of 660 Kensington. Mrs. Leonard said that Mrs. Benesh had given her the seeds, mixed into an assortment of flower seeds.

Both women were advised by Ralph H. Oyler of the Federal Narcotics Bureau that growing or assisting in the cultivation of marihuana is a federal offense whether or not the plant is known to be marihuana by the cultivators.

Police reported warnings to the citizens of Ferndale to be on the lookout for the plant. It varies in size from 3 to 15 feet. Leaves correspond to the size of the plant. They are slender and tapering with a saw-tooth edge, dark green in color.

Smoking the marihuana leaves, which are dried, chopped and rolled into cigarettes, causes a loss of control of mental faculties and moral consciousness. It produces all types of criminals.

Police Chief Carl Dick today repeated his plea to Ferndale citizens to report any plants found here.



The offending plant.

**Source: From "Police Discover Dope Growing in Kensington," in "Rainy Day in the Attic," Ferndale Gazette, September 26, 1968, newspaper clipping in the Library Collection file, Ferndale Historical Museum archives.*

MILK ON THE PORCH IN WINTER: A MEMORY OF THE LATE 1930s*



Milk bottles from Ferndale
Historical Society collection,
c. 1930s. Photo: Garry
Taylor.

. . . finding three narrow necked quart, glass milk bottles sitting on our front porch each morning, about a foot tall with the top four or five inches of pure cream. Sometimes when the weather reached below zero the contents would expand, pushing the cream and waxed, heavy paper round lids straight up into a frozen column perhaps up to an inch tall.

**Source: [Ferndale resident] Judy Austin Cleveland, in Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, and Gerry Kulick (ed.), Old Timers Tell It Like It Was, (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 174.*

Note from the Director

Spring requires a special introduction to the Ferndale Historical Society's Board of Directors--the eleven volunteers from various backgrounds (including medical, secretarial, law, social work, piano tuning, education, computers, library science, history, fire-fighting, and publishing) who make the Museum a viable research entity. The Board includes a President, Vice President, Recording Secretary, Treasurer, Research Specialist/Historian, Membership, and four other Board Members at large, two of whom are trustees. (One trustee is a City Council member who keeps the City informed on day-to-day operations of the Society—and the Museum's needs as a occupant of a City-owned building). Each of these volunteers works for the benefit of the City and its residents, past and present, logging in over 3,000 hours each year.

The museum houses artifacts from Ferndale's earliest days to the present, and has evolved into a repository of information, geneology and otherwise, that attracts queries from all over the world. Inquiries can be as difficult as finding a long-lost relative or as fun as researching what a pet's name was in 1940. Germany and France were the most recent foreign sources of queries.

Continuing projects by the museum's research staff include weekly maintenance of the O'Neill Housing Records Collection, which documents the records of the city's more than 8,000 structures, and gathering and maintaining the historical facts of Ferndale's development past and present. The publication of the Society's quarterly newsletter *The Crow's Nest*, which focuses on historical research on specific aspects of Ferndale's former day and aims at bringing a wealth of information to readers, is the proudest accomplishment of the staff.

The past two years have been a tough time for the Society, due to a lawsuit brought against us for our strict adherence of our rules of operation. The lawsuit was ultimately dropped, proving that not only were we justified in our administration of the museum, but that our Board, when challenged, works for the best interests of the Society, the Museum, and the City of Ferndale and its residents. I am truly honored to lead the Board, serve as the museum's Director, and work with a deeply committed volunteer staff.

Notices were sent out this week to remind Society members of lapsed membership accounts. Your membership is highly valued and do not want you to miss out on the next issue of *The Crow's Nest*, so please check that your membership is current. Thank you for being part of our historic family, helping to "Preserve the Heritage of Ferndale for Future Generations."

Regards,

Garry C.M Taylor

The Board of Directors, Ferndale Historical Society



Front row l-r: Jeannie Davis (Membership),
David Lungu (Website Manager),
Jan Froggatt (Recording Secretary)

Back row l-r: Greg Pawlica (Trustee),
Jean Spang (Historian/Research Specialist),
Gay Tarvis (Member at Large),
Roger W. Schmidt (Vice President)

Missing in Photo: Lisa Harteau (Member at Large)
Dan Harteau (Trustee), Chris Hammer (Treasurer)



Front row l-r: Garry C.M. Taylor (President/Museum Director),
next to George Washington (First President of the United States/
Colonies Director), mural by artist *Vincent Lipovsky*, painted on
commission from the Kiwanis Club of Ferndale, MI., and then
presented to the citizens of Ferndale by the Kiwanis Club and
Lipovsky in honor of the nation's Bi-Centennial in 1976. It hung
in Ferndale's City Hall foyer until 2011. It is now housed at the
Ferndale Historical Museum.

Please Look Inside!

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Calendar of Events:

- | | | |
|--------------------------|-----|---|
| Thursday, April 23, 2015 | 6pm | Board Meeting, Historical Society, at the Museum, public is welcome |
| Thursday, May 28, 2015 | 6pm | Board Meeting, Historical Society, at the Museum, public is welcome |
| Thursday, June 25, 2015 | 6pm | Board Meeting, Historical Society, at the Museum, public is welcome |
| Thursday, July 23, 2015 | 6pm | Board Meeting, Historical Society, at the Museum, public is welcome |

The Crow's Nest, Spring 2015

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FIRST
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