

The Crow's Nest

Newsletter of the Ferndale Historical Society

Summer 2008

THE 8:54* REACHES FERNDALE: LOCAL RAIL TRAFFIC, 1830s+

Jean Spang

Interurbans speeding through town was a pressing issue for the First Commission of the Village of Ferndale (population: 300) in 1918. Yet barely 75 years earlier, the area was still thick wilderness intersected by the ancient Saginaw Trail (named “Woodward” in 1807), the main military road from the fort in Detroit to points north. As late as 1873, stagecoaches were still seen on this route. But beginning in the 1830s, the laying of rail tracks along Woodward was to change forever the mode of traveling in southeastern Michigan. Railroad proximity would later lead to the settlement of the community known as Ferndale.

In 1830 the Territorial Legislature, in response to entrepreneurs seeking means for trade opportunities in Michigan’s interior, had chartered the Pontiac & Detroit Railway Company to build a local railroad on Woodward. But it was only in 1834, three years before Michigan became a state, that another chartered company, the Detroit-Pontiac Railroad Company (note the name order change), was able financially to begin laying tracks parallel to the existing roadway. Construction was difficult due to the strap rails placed over planks, which, following the contours of the land, tended to shift and buckle--and made for an “undulating” ride.

The tracks on Woodward reached “Ferndale” in 1838, angled through Royal Oak at what is now Washington, to Eleven Mile, then back to Woodward. Not until 1843 was there regular passenger service between Detroit and Pontiac on this route. The Grand Trunk Railway, the first large railway system in Michigan, began regular local operations in the 1870s, with tracks angling across 8 Mile from Detroit, crossing what is now Hilton Rd., and on to Michigan’s interior.

As late as 1877, horses pulled trains, both passenger and freight, along tracks. By 1837 some steam locomotives appeared, but maximum speed, for safety, was some 10 miles an hour, mainly because brakes were manually operated. Schedules were nonexistent; trains in the mid-1800s stopped randomly to pick up and discharge passengers. One engineer on the local Detroit-Pontiac route was legendary for shooting game as the train traveled along, sending the fireman out to retrieve the booty.** For safety, most trains traveled only in daylight. Fires aboard were a constant threat because of the cinder-spewing locomotives and the pot-bellied stoves used to heat passenger cars. In spite of the inconveniences, passenger service proved lucrative: By 1848 the Detroit-Pontiac railway had been bought out by the stockholders of toll roads (including Woodward). This new company ultimately would pioneer the interurban system which would further transform southeastern Michigan transportation. *(continued on p. 2)*



Local Interurban on Woodward
ca. 1900's



Grand Trunk Train Railroad
9 Mile Road Crossing- ca. 1940



Grand Trunk Train – ca. 1956
R. Elmers Collection

(continued from p. 1)

By 1850, introduction of the telegraph made train traffic safer and on schedule, and iron rails replaced strap rails, allowing a smoother, safer ride. The Westinghouse air brake, patented in 1869, soon replaced the old hand-operated brakes, allowing trains to travel at higher speed. For local farmers north of 8 Mile, selling wood to the railroad company became an important source of income. Logs would be stacked next to the track; the railroad would load them aboard for transport to the Royal Oak “train garage,” located between Second and Forth Streets, where they would be sawed into the proper lengths.

The year 1890 was a key turning point for local rail traffic. Albert Campbell sold his 80-acre farm (Hilton/9Mile), with Grand Trunk right-of-way, to a conglomerate intent on building a local resort, “Urbanrest,” for “weary” Detroiters. The resort never materialized, but a settlement, later named “Ferndale,” did, thanks to its location easily accessible by public transport. By 1896, interurbans, a new form of “electrified” rail transit, were regularly running locally on Woodward.

By 1900 the Detroit United Railway had consolidated all interurban lines. But the widening of Woodward in 1920 into an 8-lane highway crowded the tracks to one side, ultimately ending interurban traffic forever. Ironically, by 1900 the Detroit metro area had more interurban lines than any other U.S. city, yet by 1931, earlier than any other U.S. city, it had abandoned all of them.***

The Detroit Street Railways began running streetcars on a Woodward median through Ferndale in 1930, the same year a train depot was built at Vester/Hilton to accommodate the Grand Trunk Railway’s new rapid transit passenger service. Diesel engines began to replace steam locomotives in the late 1940s. In 1947, buses replaced streetcars; rail tracks were no longer visible on Woodward. The final run of the Grand Trunk Western’s Detroit-Pontiac commuter train was October 27, 1983. Soon after, Ferndale’s train depot was demolished. Significant rail traffic in the city seemed dead.

In the late 1980s, however, the train yard in Ferndale was reinvigorated as a center combining truck and train means to transport freight from all over the world. Once again Ferndale had become an important transportation hub, one which had outlasted stagecoaches, interurbans, streetcars, various other incarnations of rail service, and most buses, yet always coexisting with the ubiquitous “horseless carriage.”

At 8:54am today, any double-decker freight cars rumbling past the Hilton/Nine Mile train crossing are a profound reminder of the phenomenal history of rail traffic in Ferndale in the past 170 years. Consider also: The passing train’s engineer most likely will not be slowing down to shoot supper!

Notes: * Actual time of arrival in Ferndale, except Sundays, Grand Trunk Suburban route, Detroit-Pontiac, August 1, 1931 timetable, cited in Schramm, Henning, and Andrews. ** Dunbar, 54. *** Dunbar, 232.

Sources Consulted: Maurice Cole, Ferndale of Yesteryear, Ferndale Historical Society (1971): passim. Willis Frederick Dunbar, All Aboard! A History of Railroads in Michigan (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans), 1969. Frank N. Elliott, When the Railroad Was King (Lansing: Michigan Dept. of State, Bureau of History, 1988, passim. Bernard Fitzsimons, 150 Years of North American Railroads (Secaucus NJ: Winchmore/Chartwell, 1982). Roy F. Goodspeed (Ferndale Assessor/DPW Director), My Forty Years with the City of Ferndale, 1925-66, unpaget typescript. William H. Henning, Ed., Detroit, Its Trolleys and Interurbans (Fraser MI: Michigan Transit Museum, 1976): passim. Jack E. Schramm, William H. Henning, and Richard R. Andrews, When Eastern Michigan Rode the Rails (Glendale CA: Interurban Press, 1984): passim.



Hilton Road Crossing in Ferndale
ca. 1940



Train Derailed at RR Yard
ca. 1990's



Nine Mile Road Crossing in
in Ferndale – ca. 1940

FERNDALE'S FIRST RECORDED RACE: HORSE vs. TRAIN

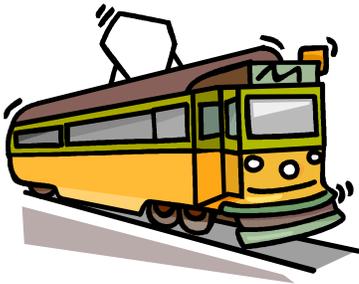
The first "formal" race [through Ferndale] was the result of a feud between a promoter of the Detroit-Pontiac railroad, Nelson Paine Stewart, and a railroad "detractor," one "Salt" Williams, over the abilities of the new rail line. Salt wagered that he could "lick the train any day with a good team of horses." Stewart accepted the bet: Salt was to race the train in a horse-drawn carriage the twenty-five mile distance from Pontiac to Detroit. The winner was to be waiting at the Griswold House [in Detroit] with dinner ordered, and the loser was to pay for the dinner and hand over \$5,000. The road between the two towns was sandy, full of ruts, and knee-deep in mud when it rained. Stewart didn't see how he could lose. Yet when the train got to Detroit there was Salt waiting, greeting Stewart with "Dinner is ready, Nelson." The night before the race, Salt and his cohorts had taken away all the cordwood stacked along the railroad making it necessary for Stewart and others aboard to chop and saw wood every few miles to provide fuel for the locomotive.

Story related by Frederick S. Randall of Kalamazoo, great-grandson of Nelson P. Stewart, and summarized here from the account in Willis Frederick Dunbar, *All Aboard! A History of Railroads in Michigan*, Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 1969: 55.

BY TRAIN THROUGH FERNDALE, DETROIT-PONTIAC RAILROAD CO., 1843+

The operation of this railroad in the early years was noted for its slowness. The trains stopped just about anywhere to receive or discharge passengers, or for other purposes . . . It was said, for instance, that the engineer was fond of shooting game as the locomotive passed through the unsettled countryside, and that if he had a lucky shot he would halt the train and send the fireman to secure the slaughtered bird or beast. A traveler told that an old lady stopped the train by waving a bandanna handkerchief and inquired if a lawyer named Drake was aboard. The attorney was found and gave the lady some legal counsel, after which the train proceeded. The joke went the rounds that a middle-aged man died of extreme old age while on the railroad to Pontiac, and if one wanted to pronounce a "fearful imprecation" on another they had only to say "Go to Pontiac"

Quote from Willis Frederick Dunbar, *All Aboard! A History of Railroads in Michigan* (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1969:54. Phrases in quotation marks are cited by Dunbar as from *Mich. Pioneer and Hist. Colls.*, XIV (1889), 411.



Officers of the Ferndale Historical Society

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Ethyl Corporation in Ferndale – ca. 1950's

**FERNDALE'S FIRST CORNER:
8 MILE/PINECREST**

*Unknown author, typescript manuscript, 1961**

[Long before the Woodward/Nine Mile corner became the center of Ferndale, the corner of Baseline (8 Mile) and the Saginaw Trail (Pinecrest) was the premier gateway for the route leading north into Michigan's interior. The following account, written in the early 1960s by an unknown author for publication in the newsletter of the Ethyl Corporation--the corporation which built its facilities on this site--documents the history of the first corner in what was to become Ferndale.--Ed.]

Historic ground is the 26 acres of natural woodland upon which the Ethyl Laboratories in suburban Detroit stand. Back in the days of the Michigan Territory, the property became the first northern gateway of Detroit, and as such played a definite part in the opening of Northern Michigan.

"The light of civilization was carried northward from Detroit by the first explorers of the interior of Michigan by going through the gateway, or lands, now occupied by the Ethyl Corporation Laboratories," is the way W.T. Miller, noted Michigan historian, puts it.*

It was just 130 years ago that the white man, in organized party, first ventured into the dark, foreboding forest that lay to the north of the village of Detroit, nestled close to the banks of the river that gave it its name. In the fall of 1818, Major Oliver Williams, a prominent Detroit merchant, set out along the Saginaw Trail with a party to determine whether an Indian trading post in the interior would prove practicable. The Saginaw Trail was the route most generally followed by the Indians in their journeys into the little outpost of Detroit to receive their treaty annuities from first the French settlers, then the British, and finally the Americans. But while the Indians knew the Saginaw Trail well, the French and British had made no attempts to explore it.

Where the Laboratories now stand was a definite crest. The ridge forming this crest came from the south and bisected what is now 8 Mile Rd., the busy east-west highway which the Laboratories face. The Saginaw Trail ran some three miles through the dim light of the heavy forest in a swampy section before it was free of the wilderness as it emerged upon this ridge.

"The ridge that the Williams party found itself on in 1818 was just at the edge of the lines surveyed the year before along the baseline of the state, and exactly at the entrance into a new county contemplated by the authorities, to be known as Oakland County. Then and there, the first northern gateway of Detroit was established--a gateway that would form the only practical and available outlet for Detroit northerly from the town." (So records Mr. Miller, the historian.)

Within weeks after Major Williams's trek, a party of five leading Detroit citizens further explored the Saginaw Trail and the wilderness of either side of it. An account of their trip appearing in the Detroit Gazette of 1818, states in part: "Our course from the place (Detroit) was northwesterly. We passed through eight miles of land that is but little undulated, yet sufficiently so as to afford many good habitations for farmers. The soil is good quality and everywhere sandy and remarkably loose. The timber is Sycamore, Ash, Sugar Maple, Lynn, Elm, Poplar, Ironwood, Beech, Hickory, and Oak red and white. We there came into ridges of Oak land . . ." That was their brief description of the property which the Ethyl Laboratories now occupy.

(Even today, a small portion of the land is preserved in its natural state as far as new construction and laboratory operations permit. In this area, behind the buildings, feeding stations (continued on p. 5)

(continued from p. 4)

and shelters for birds and animals are maintained by Laboratories personnel. More than half of the known families of flowers in Michigan as well as 25 different kinds of grass, have been identified on the Ethyl grounds.)

Travel along the Trail reached such volume that a tavern “to shelter the weary pioneer after laboring through the swamp section southerly from this property” was established on the site of the present Ethyl Laboratories lands. The proprietor of the tavern was one Jabez White, who “did a good business during the short time that it operated there and before the Saginaw Trail at this point (1823 or 1824) was abandoned in favor of the straight road built by the government and now known as Woodward Avenue.”

“In that early day,” records Historian Miller, “White assisted the weary traveler in conserving his strength as a mighty element in his ability to travel at all. Today, the Ethyl Corporation, at the same approximate location, generally assists the traveler, in an automobile, in many ways by means of the research conducted at its Laboratories. What a contrast in little over a century and a quarter.”

[From a typescript manuscript, stamped October 14, 1961, intended to be published in the *Ethyl Corporation Employees Magazine*, found in the files of the Ferndale Public Library, now in the Ferndale Historical Museum Archives. * W.T. Miller (of Justice Court, Ferndale), “First Gateway of Southern Oakland Co.,” his quoted article first appeared by special permission in the *Ferndale Enterprise* in 1934.] **Note:** The Ethyl Corporation occupied the 8Mile/Pinecrest site, 1940 to the mid-1980s, when it was sold to the Hayes-Lemmerz Corporation. The site is now for sale.

FERNDALE FIRSTS--1923: THE POST OFFICE OPENS AND THE POLICE DEPARTMENT USES FINGERPRINT IDENTIFICATION

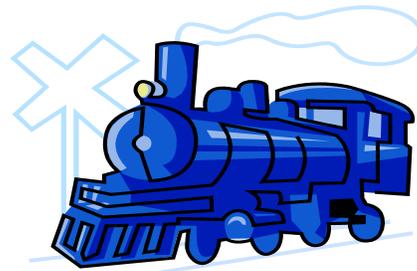
The year 1923 was somewhat of a banner year as in this year the city petitioned for and won the Post Office. Also in this year the first criminal was captured through the application of the Finger Print check-up method. This was accomplished by Chief of Police George W. Smith and the offender was the young man who robbed the homes of Ed Hyland and Ed Beauchamp, the stores of the C.F. Smith Company and 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.

Source: Edited typescript quote from *The Ferndale Gazette* (no day or month cited), 1939, in Ferndale Historical Museum archives.

LAST OF THE STEAM ENGINES

Grand Trunk Western was one of the last North American railroads to use steam locomotives in regular service. The last steam engine seen was in 1960.

Source: <http://gtw.railfan.net/>. Retrieved 4/25/08.



LIFE IN THE UNITED STATES: 1906*
*[Eleven years before Ferndale was incorporated as a village in 1917.
Twenty-one years before Ferndale became a city, 1927.]*

Average life expectancy was 47 years.
Only 14 percent of homes had a bathtub.
Only 8 percent of homes had a telephone.
There were only 8,000 cars, and only 144 miles of paved roads.
Maximum speed limit in most cities was 10mph.
Average wage was 22 cents per hour.
Average worker made between \$200 and \$400 per year.
More than 95 percent of all births took place at home.
Ninety percent of all doctors had no college education (only medical school "training").
Sugar cost 4 cents a pound; eggs, 14 cents a dozen; coffee, 15 cents a pound.
Most women only washed their hair once a month (borax or egg yolks for shampoo).
Five leading causes of death: pneumonia/influenza, tuberculosis, diarrhea, heart disease, stroke.
Crossword puzzles, canned beer, and iced tea hadn't been invented yet.
Two out of every 10 adults couldn't read or write.
Only 6 percent of Americans had attended high school
Marijuana, heroin, and morphine were all available over the counter at the corner drugstore.
There were about 230 reported murders in the entire U.S.A.

Source: A list printed from an unidentified internet source, no author cited, copy found in the Ferndale Historical Museum archives.

**FERNDALE'S NATIONALLY-KNOWN RAILROAD SIGNALMAN:
WILLIAM J. DOBLE**

One of the most important people on a railroad route is the signalman: He expedites and controls railroad traffic while ensuring safe conditions. A long-time Ferndale resident living on Albany, William J. Doble (1904-1972), born in Exeter, England, and having only an elementary education, became a Chief Signalman on the railroad serving Ferndale. He ultimately became Chairman of the national Brotherhood of Railroad Signalman (New York Central Rail Road, Lines West), serving from 1931 to 1962. His responsibilities, handled from his desk in Ferndale: expediting grievances, labor-management relations, coordinating subordinate locals' activities, and addressing disputes concerning conditions of employment. His collected papers, measuring some 31.5 linear feet in shelf space and now housed at Cornell University, document the history of railroad labor-management relations for his era and provide a unique perspective on American railroads of the time.

*Source consulted: <http://rms.library.cornell.edu/EAD/htmldocs/KCL05182.html>.
Retrieved 4/25/08.*

**THE OLEO WAR:
FERNDALE PUBLIC SCHOOLS, 1948**

Edward J. Ruelle, trustee on the Ferndale board of education, volunteered to spend a few days in jail at the board meeting Thursday night, to test the state ruling banning the use of oleomargarine in the schools.

The four school cafeterias in the district use approximately two cases or 64 pounds of butter per month at a cost of between 77 cents and 90 cents per pound. Oleomargarine would cost a little less than half or 40 cents, Mrs. Ethel Brooks, manager of the school cafeterias, estimated.

The Federal lunch program which subsidizes the Ferndale cafeterias and sets the standards for the lunches will allow fortified oleo, Mrs. Brooks explained. But, a state law forbids its use. Ferndale schools will continue to use butter; Ruelle stays Out of jail.

Quotation from a March 26, 1948 clipping, probably from the *Daily Tribune*, in the Ferndale Historical Museum archives.

UNSCRAMBLING ROY'S RADIO SHOP AND THE SCHNELL & SCHMIDT HARDWARE

The Spring issue of the Crow's Nest had a photo of the Schnell & Schmidt Hardware store which was incorrectly labeled as a photo of Roy's Radio Shop (Allen/Marshall corner). The correct photos:



Roy's Radio Shop, Established 1926
Photo, 1932
Credit: Kotlarek Collection



Roy's Radio Shop Interior, 1920's
Credit: Kotlarek Collection



Schnell & Schmidt Hardware Store
Woodward at Academy, 1919
(Original Store, 1917 Woodward
at College)
Credit: R. Elmers; LaRock Collection

NEWS NOTES FROM THE MUSEUM DIRECTOR

A thank-you to our readers for their ongoing support of the museum. Membership renewals continue to come in--and donations as well. We are very appreciative here at the museum for the ongoing support. Building the museum into an invaluable resource for Ferndale could not be done without this continuing generosity.

The reorganization of the museum is now complete. We have a whole new look, including a public area convenient for research projects and reading. Special thanks to **Jean Spang** and **Phyllis Hill** for their hard work during this transformation. Please come and see the new displays.

The museum will now be open on Mondays and Wednesdays from 10:00am-1:00pm, and on Saturdays, 2:00pm-4:00pm. We also have a new museum website: www.ferndalehistoricalsociety.org.

Please visit us soon. And remember: we are always here to assist you with your inquiries.

*Garry Andrews,
Museum Director and Society Treasurer*

JUNE, JULY, AUGUST--AND SEPTEMBER 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.

**FERNDALE MICHIGAN, U.S.A.
Latitude 42.46N Longitude 83.13 W**

VOLUNTEERS ARE ALWAYS WELCOME AT THE MUSEUM

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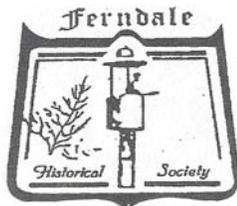
CALENDAR

Thursday, June 26, 6pm	<u>Board Meeting</u> , Historical Society, <u>held at the Museum</u>
Thursday, July 3, 7:30pm	Summer Film Series: <i>Unsung Films of the '70s--The Beguiled</i> (Clint Eastwood) Ferndale Public Library. Free.
Thursday, July 24	No Historical Society Board Meeting!
Thursday, August 7, 7:30pm	Summer Film Series: <i>Unsung Films of the '70s--The Little Girl Who Lives Down the Lane</i> (Jodie Foster, Martin Sheen). Ferndale Public Library. Free.
Thursday, August 28	No Historical Society Board Meeting!
Thursday, Sept. 25, 6pm	<u>Board Meeting</u> , Historical Society, <u>held at the Museum</u>

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