

"Documenting Ferndale" from Pg. 2

Homes on St. Louis, her own street, were the first to receive Diane's attention. By examining city directories and City Hall records, some dating as far back as Ferndale's earliest days, she was able to construct, for each address, ownership records from a building's construction to the present day. To date, she has recorded the ownership histories of all structures on Ferndale's west wide and those along each side of Woodward and Nine Mile. She is now working on the city's east side, currently on University. The fascination of the entire project for Diane? Tracing the ups and downs of Ferndale's development as reflected in the home ownership changes in good and bad economic times. The number of Ferndale residents who lost their homes during the Depression but whose names, several years later, reappear as owners of the same house is, she says, a testament to the resilience of Ferndale residents dating from the city's earliest days.

As a result of Diane's diligence, some 68 volumes listing the ownership sequence of Ferndale residences are now on file at the Museum. Arranged by street, then address, these volumes allow researchers to trace, in one organized information resource, the ownership history of Ferndale dwellings and, in the process, catch a unique glimpse into the development of Ferndale in the 20th Century and beyond.

**Museum Hours**

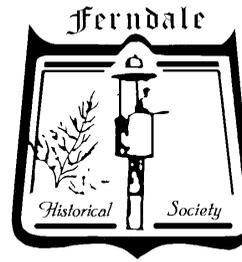
Saturdays  
2:00 - 4:00 PM  
or by appointment  
(248) 545-7606



**Ferndale Historical Society**  
1651 Liberois  
Ferndale, Michigan 48220

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

*Ferndale Historical Society*



# The Crow's Nest

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

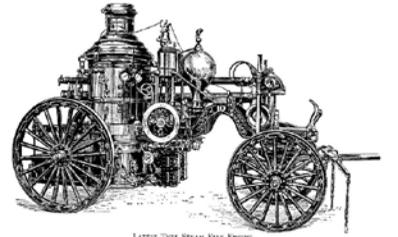
Newsletter of the Ferndale Historical Society

Winter, 2005

Vol. 21

## Fire Fighting and Ferndale History

Grass fires in open fields and marshy bogs were a concern to early 1900s pioneers living in wood houses in what was to become Ferndale. Soon, for fire protection, these residents relied, for a fee, on the volunteer fire department formed in 1908 by the Village of Royal Oak. By 1913 the Village of Ferndale had organized its own volunteer department. But not until 1918, when population had reached 1,600 and a city charter and bond passed, did Ferndale form an official fire department. Its first equipment: a two-wheel cart holding a 40-gallon soda and acid chemical tank; no records indicate where it was kept or how it was



LATER TYPE STEAM FIRE ENGINE

pulled. By 1919, a new fire engine, named the "Potato Bug" (presumably for its looks), was acquired. It was housed in the Village President's garage on W. Saratoga--along with his chickens--until 1920 when a fire hall was built at 135 E. Nine Mile. To provide additional fire and emergency medical services to a growing city population, a branch fire station was built farther east on Nine Mile in 1929. A new headquarters was built, on Livernois, in 1957. Some nine fire chiefs have overseen the Department; their staffs ranging from one man in 1918; 47, in 1967; to 32, in 2002. "Queenie," a mutt who "showed up one day" in 1937 and stayed for years, was the Department's only "official" dog.

Fire Department challenges have included varied fire, medical, and police emergencies. Among the more memorable fires: various warehouse, chemical plant, and lumberyard conflagrations in east side industrial areas (1930s and beyond); Federal Department Store, 1943; plane crash, Roosevelt Park, 1946; State Packing House Market and S & C Diner, 1947; Carey Shoes, 1953; and the Kar Nut Co. (1953 and again in 1971). In 1961, the Minser's Garage explosion. In the 1970s: the Hedges Wigwam and Muskie Bay fires. In the 1980s: the train accident at the Detroit Zoo, injuring 22 people; and the Rialto Restaurant tragedy requiring police sharpshooters and fire department ladders to assist emergency crews in reaching a gunman's injured victims. And in the 1990s/early 2000s: the Bangkok Express and One Stop Deli fires.

*Continued on pg. 2*

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“Fire Fighting” from Pg. 1

Record fires have included that in the Ostrander Building, 1975, which ultimately destroyed almost all of the north side of Nine Mile’s business district. The Fire Department’s “best customer” ever was the Reichold Chemical Co., which, from 1922-1988, recorded 93 fires. The best protected fire the Department ever fought was that in 1959 at Detroit Bank & Trust--encircled by police with submachine guns as firefighters fought the blaze. And Ferndale’s most ironic fire? GM’s landmark AC Sparkplug billboard, Woodward at Eight Mile, featuring the “world’s largest sparkplug” beneath which scrolled an electronic message: *Home Fires Are Costly*. The sign caught fire in 1971. End of the world’s largest sparkplug.

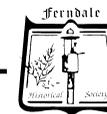
House fires have far outnumbered industrial and commercial fires over the years. Causes have ranged from “spontaneous combustion” to unattended candles, electrical problems, and a dog knocking over a space heater. Yet two of Ferndale’s most horrific home fires remain the Belcher case, on Hazelhurst, 1965, in which five children and their mother died; the husband later charged with arson and murder; and the Yaple case, on W. Troy, 1992, in which a family of five perished; a Christmas tree was blamed, but doubts linger as to why the family was unable to escape.

Ferndale’s fire department, from the city’s early days of grass-fires concerns to today’s hazardous materials and Homeland Security challenges, has remained a leader in training, state-of-the-art equipment, and service. Whether walking into fires at risk to themselves, rescuing a fire victim from a burning roof, aiding a heart attack victim, delivering a baby, or resuscitating Waldo, a cat found in the Bangkok Express fire, Ferndale fire fighters have a proud record. And the Department remains, to date, one of the few cities--of any size in the U.S.--to have had a comprehensive and thoroughly readable account of its history published, Capt. Roger Schmidt’s *Tough as Nails*, a title which indeed characterizes Ferndale firefighters through the past eight decades. \*Information source for this article: Capt. Roger Schmidt, *Tough as Nails: A History of the Ferndale Fire Department*. Published by the Ferndale Historical Society, 2004. 448 p. Photographs. Foreword by radio/TV personality Cynthia Bruce Canty, whose father, Milton Bruce, was a captain in the Department.

## Documenting Ferndale’s Housing Stock: Progress Report

Diane O’Neill, long-time Museum volunteer, enthusiastically continues the task of tracing the ownership history of Ferndale’s houses, one by one. She began this endeavor in 1995 at the behest of Gerry Kulick, Historical Society charter member and officer, who suggested that Ferndale history would not be complete until a comprehensive record of the “sequence of owners” of Ferndale’s housing stock was compiled.

*Continued on back page.*



“A Walk Down Nine Mile” from Pg. 3

Outside of the Library, under a front window, is a gray inlaid marker designating the location of Ferndale’s 100-year *Time Capsule, 1976-2076*. And at the back of the Library is a small grotto, complete with benches, a tile mural, and ornamental grasses, constructed by the Ferndale Arts Commission in memory of its member Ellen Schmidt; under the Library’s rear window is a gray inlaid marker over the site of Ferndale’s 25-year *Time Capsule, 1993-2018*.

On Nine Mile, across from the Library, is the site of Ferndale’s first church, St. Paul’s United Methodist Church, built in 1917. The Historical Society is in the process of obtaining historic status designation for this building (which still houses a church denomination). Back across Nine Mile, next to the Library, the State of Michigan has already designated Ferndale’s first school, built in 1915 (later the city’s first public library; now privately owned), as an historic site.

Moving to the Woodward median, south side, a Ferndale resident sees a monument inscribed *We shall never forget the grateful memory of brave men of this area who have given their lives for their country. Presented to the people of Ferndale by MOMS of America, Ferndale Unit 23, 1951*. On the median’s north side is a large boulder inscribed *In appreciation, Ferndale’s Adopt-a Tree Sponsors* and listing 13 contributors. (Adjacent to this site is the proposed location of the replica of the Crow’s Nest, Ferndale 1920s traffic signal, to be built in 2005.)

Proceeding up Nine Mile, through the business district (alert to sidewalk *Ferndale* insignias imbedded at intervals), the erstwhile walker finds, at the corner of Planavon, the Schiffer Memorial Park, with benches, a drinking fountain, and a boulder honoring Henry A. Shiffer, former mayor.

Farther up Nine Mile, at the north Livernois corner, is a boulder designating the original site of *Lincoln High School, 1920-1976*; a marker *Erected by Joe and Barbara Mahan to Commemorate the 50th Reunion, Class of June 1944*. And a few steps down Livernois at Nine Mile is Ferndale’s new Memorial park, a quiet place impressive with monuments listing those Ferndale residents who gave their lives in our nation’s conflicts. World War I, World War II, Korea, Viet Nam, and Iraq.

Time needed for a “tour” of Nine Mile’s historical site, memorials, and public art lo-



### **VOLUNTEERS DESPERATELY NEEDED!**

Got some spare time? How about volunteering at the Museum? Mondays, Saturdays, or any days? All sorts of skills are welcome. Lots of opportunities to learn about your town, past and present!



***A Walk Down Nine Mile:  
Ferndale's Historic Site Markers, Memorials, and Public Art***

A three-block Nine Mile walk, City Hall west to Livernois, reveals sights that tourists might find intriguing but Ferndale residents often ignore. Maybe a review is in order.

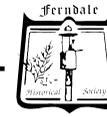
Paying a water bill at City Hall becomes a noble deed if, at the head of the stairs, a Ferndale resident notices George Washington, proclamation in hand, announcing (his troops in the wintery background): *You have in a common cause fought and triumphed together. The independence and liberty you possess are the work of joint effort of common dangers, sufferings and successes.*



This mural, painted by artist Vincent A. Lipovsky, was commissioned by the Ferndale Kiwanis Club, in honor of the nation's bicentennial anniversary, 1976. And outside the City Hall front door, in front of the bike rack, and inlaid in cement is an oval insignia of *Ferndale*, a pattern repeated in some nine other sidewalk locations along either side of Nine Mile between City Hall and Livernois. This logo was designed by local artist David Leannais as part of the refurbishing of the Nine Mile corridor in the early 1990s.

Next door to City Hall, at the Public Library, and visible in the library's front window, is Ferndale's only work by Marshall M. Fredericks, the sculptor famous for Detroit's *Spirit of Detroit* and Royal Oak's *Star Dream*. The Ferndale Kiwanis Club purchased the Fredericks rendering of a mother bear and her cub sitting back-to-back as a gift to *the Boys & Girls of Ferndale* in honor of the opening of the new Ferndale Public Library, 1954.

*Continued on Pg.5*



**Please Search Your Memory and Your Scrapbook!**

Three puzzles you may be able to answer: (1) The Museum staff is still looking for **information about and pictures of the Dipsy Doodle**, the popular Ferndale drive-in restaurant of the 1950's "cruisin' days." (2) A reader asks: Does anyone remember "a couple of **open bowling lanes installed on Woodward on either College, University, or Hazelhurst soon after the war** (WWII)? Because of the weather they didn't last long." And (3) can you provide information about the **memorial obelisk on the Woodward median, 1945**, shown in the photograph to the right? Specifically, **what happened to it after the War?**



These are three queries that Museum staff have been unable to answer. If you have any information --recollections, photographs, memorabilia-- on any of these topics, please contact the Museum staff at 248-545-7606. They and Museum visitors will be grateful for your help.

**HAVE TIMES CHANGED?**

[*To the Editor*]:

The chaotic conditions that exist in the halls and the intermission period between classes have been very noticeable. The bumping, fighting, and running cause much trouble. There is also another condition which is very unnecessary. That is the ever-present group of girls and even boys who persist in walking in formation down the hall and preventing others from going on their way. The comments of different teachers concerning this have not been very commendable. . . .

[*Signed Students' Protectorate*]

*From The Lincolnian, [Lincoln High School newspaper]*

*Thursday, March 31,*