

# The Crow's Nest

Newsletter of the Ferndale Historical Society

Winter 2008

## LANDMARK BUILDINGS IN THE CIVILIZING OF FRONTIER FERNDALE

*Jean Spang*

The story of early 20th-Century Ferndale reads like a script for a Saturday matinee serial western: Roving bandits distracting homeowners then robbing their houses. A Deputy Sheriff gunned down at Woodward/Nine by a grocery store robber who had stolen \$3.88 (in pennies). A village commissioner dismissed from office for “an offense under a village ordinance.”\* An entire Commission recalled for “failure to perform their official duties for the best interest of the Village.”\* The Ku Klux Klan burning crosses in front yards. The Purple Gang holed up in a rumored hideout on Pinecrest near Marshall. And then, at last, a former Texas Ranger, Officer Mike Burkart, complete with horse, arrives to help the Ferndale Police Department save the day (total Force, 1920: 5; office, a “booth” at Woodward/Nine).

At the time, the Village of Ferndale had a population of 2,640 (U.S. Census 1920), four telephones,\*\* one newspaper, one school, one church, and no permanent seat of government. It also had dedicated residents who, in laying the groundwork for civic and religious institutions, were to construct landmark buildings that served as meeting places for various groups and activities that were to play an integral role in establishing Ferndale as a viable incorporated city in 1928.

The “Ferndale Boosters” (today’s Chamber of Commerce), organized in 1916, focused on “boost[ing] the movement for incorporation of the Village” and “its betterment.”\* Service clubs and lodges, dedicated to improving community life, quickly followed--each constructing a meeting place for their respective members: The Masons, formed in 1920, built their Temple (now the Via Nove site) at Nine/Planavon in 1924, the same year that the Oddfellows (I.O.O.F) built a hall (now the Elks Club) at Woodward/Vester. By late 1924, a newly organized Rotary Club was meeting in Oddfellows Hall, second floor; and the Exchange Club, in the Methodist Church.

Initial meeting places for the earliest religious groups were makeshift. The interdenominational Christian Assembly of Ferndale met in Central School’s basement, as did two families of pioneer Episcopalians. The Baptists met first in a storefront on Nine Mile, then in a building where the post office is today. From the Porter Farm (Nine/Woodward), Catholics bought a chicken coop, which they moved to the present

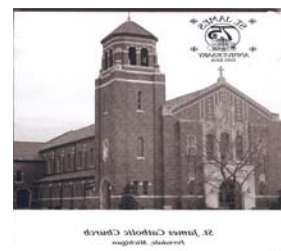
*[continued next page]*



**First Baptist church**  
1841 Pinecrest  
Founded 1917



**Ferndale's Oldest Landmark Church**  
Evangelical United Brethren Church  
(present Jeffries Baptist)  
165 E. Nine Mile  
Founded 1917



**St James Catholic Church**  
241 Pearson  
Founded 1919

[continued from p. 1]

St. James site for services. The woods near Pinecrest/Drayton was the first meeting place for the earliest Presbyterians; later they moved to a room in Roosevelt School. The Methodist Episcopal group gathered in Oddfellows Hall. And the Lutherans, an initial group of 23, met on the third floor of a hall at Woodward/Nine.

Not until early 1917 was the first church constructed: The Tabernacle, meeting place of the Evangelical United Brethren (later St. Paul's United Methodist Church, now Jeffries Baptist), at Nine/Bermuda (present building erected 1920). Subsequent construction of other churches representing mainline denominations then began in earnest: First Baptist, 1917 (chapel, on Nine Mile), 1927 (church, on Pinecrest); St. James Catholic, 1920 (chapel), 1949 (church completed); St Luke's Episcopal, 1921; First United Methodist, 1922 (completed 1951); Drayton Avenue Presbyterian, 1924 (sanctuary, 1958); and Zion Lutheran, 1924 (basement), 1950 (sanctuary). (Today Ferndale has some 30 churches.)

Attention to the development of public schools was a prime focus for civic and religious groups alike. (The Rev. William Bryant, pastor of Drayton Avenue Presbyterian, served as President of the early Ferndale School Board.) Plays, cantatas, minstrel shows, and recitals--all of the cultural amenities of a civilized urban area--were soon listed among the activities in various churches, as were numerous relief efforts for the needy. And service organizations consistently conducted fundraising events for various community services.

By 1928, Ferndale, now incorporated as a city, had a population of some 14,407, separate police and fire departments, a city government meeting place, and major utilities. Also present were four newspapers, seven doctors, a dentist, eight elementary schools plus a high school, and the beginnings of a hospital. Ferndale had all the characteristics of "civilization," except for a library, which would be opened in 1930.

But perhaps the most telling example of the city's "arrival" was the opening of the Ferndale Theater (now the Magic Bag) in 1931. City residents flocked to this state-of-the-art entertainment center. Their best recollections of this famed movie house?\*\*\* The Saturday matinee serial westerns featuring roving bandits, mayhem of all sorts, and the famed Texas Ranger . . .

Sources: Records of various service organizations and churches in Ferndale Historical Museum Archives. \*Maurice F. Cole, *Ferndale of Yesteryear* (Ferndale Historical Society, 1971), p. 53 and *passim*. \*\*Charles G. Richardson, "A Brief History of Ferndale" (MS copy of speech given at dinner of the Pennsylvania Club, October 9, 1961, unpagged) Ferndale Historical Museum Archives. \*\*\**Old Timers Tell It Like It Was*, comp. Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, and Gerry Kulick (Ed.), (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987), includes various accounts of Ferndale Theater favorites.



**St Luke's Episcopal Church**  
**540 W. Lewiston**  
**Founded 1921**



**First United Methodist Church**  
**22331 Woodward**  
**Founded 1922**



**Drayton Avenue Presbyterian Church**  
**2441 Pinecrest**  
**Founded 1924**

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## Officers of the Ferndale Historical Society

**President**  
**Vice President**  
**Recording Secretary**  
**Treasurer**  
**Corresponding Secretary**  
**Historian/Membership**  
**Communications/Publicity**

**Roger Schmidt**  
**Frank Flores**  
**Christine Kole**  
**Garry Andrews**  
**Jean Spang**  
**Lynne Prudden**  
**Garry Andrews**

**Board of Directors: David Lungu, Eleanor Mielke, Mary White**  
**Trustees: Ray White; Robert Bruner, City manager**

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### FIRST CHURCH: THE TABERNACLE

*While used as a Tabernacle the building was stove-heated, and on real cold days the members of the congregation would bring their own small kerosene heaters to the building to help in keeping the building warm during church services. If meals were to be served, a curtain was strung across one end of the room, so the ladies preparing the meal would have some privacy in their work . . . After the construction of the present church edifice, the old tabernacle building was used for many years, from 1921 until 1927, as the village garage.*

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Maurice Cole, *Ferndale of Yesteryear* (Ferndale Historical Society, 1971): 31. [Cole includes interviews with original Tabernacle members.]

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### FERNDALE PIONEERS

*. . . I'm convinced that those early pioneers in Ferndale were every bit as tough as those old pioneers of the West. There weren't any cowboys riding the open range, but there was Mike Burkhardt [Burkart], mounted on his trusty steed, chasing thieves through the open fields.*

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Sheldon Damon, in *Old Timers Tell It Like It Was*, comp. Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, & Gerry Kulick (Ed.), (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 61

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### KU KLUX KLAN IN ACTION

*I also remember one time we were threatened by the members of the Ku Klux Klan who planned to burn a cross on our lawn. We didn't sleep that night . . .*

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Leona (Greene) Vance, *Old Timer's Tell It Like It Was*, comp. Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, and Gerry Kulick (Ed/), (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 61



Ferndale Police Officer  
Mike Burkart  
Former Texas Ranger – ca. 1920



Ku Klux Klan Leader  
Picnic in Ferndale  
1925



Ku Klux Klan Picnic  
Ferndale  
1925

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### EARLY RESPONSE TO THE KLAN

*A group of white-sheeted clansmen set up headquarters in Bailey's Woods [behind present Wilson School]--and they, too, were tolerated until the night they burned a cross on a citizen's front lawn. Once again, the Citizens' Vigilantes went into action--gave them 24 hours to get out of town and stay out. They were never heard from again.*

*Yes, those old pioneers were very tolerant people until their community was threatened, then they took action--fast action.*

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Sheldon Damon, in *Old Timers Tell It Like It Was*, comp. Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, and Gerry Kulick (Ed.), (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 65.

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## THE PURPLE GANG IN FERNDALE

*There was rumor of Purple Gang members in the Marshall and Pinecrest area and of dynamite buried underground. Whether an experience I had tied into that I'll never know. Anyway, one day I was playing with some cousins and we went over to the woods around the present site of the Ethyl Corporation and found a man hanging, shot in the head. Rumors were that he had been killed by a bullet and then hanged to appear like suicide.*

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Frank W. Tomsett, in *Old Timers Tell It Like It Was*, comp. Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, & Gerry Kulick (Ed.), (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 99.

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## THE PURPLE GANG HIDEOUT

*One memory of Marshall street that always stood out was the talk about members of the infamous Purple Gang living in the house located at the southeast corner of Marshall at Pinecrest. Supposedly they had hidden or buried dynamite in the backyard. I have never found out if that story was true or not.*

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Robert I. Elmers, in *Old Timers Tell It Like It Was*, comp. Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh, & Gerry Kulick (Ed.), Ferndale Historical Society, 1987: 172



Ferndale Police pose with loot from Prohibition Days

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## FERNDALE'S SPECIAL LANDMARKS PRE-1920s - 1930s



First Meeting Place of St. James  
Congregation at Chicken Coop  
Purchased from the Porter Farm  
ca. 1917



Ferndale Theater (Interior)  
Site of the favorite Saturday Matinee:  
Westerns!



Ferndale's Masonic Temple  
Nine Mile/Planavon  
1924

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## FERNDALE HISTORY REACHES THE *NEW YORK TIMES*!

The crossword puzzle in the *New York Times*, Thursday, October 4, 2007, asks for an eight-letter word (56 Across) for “A Detroit suburb named for the plants the area was once overgrown with.” The answer: F-E-R-N-D-A-L-E!

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## FRANK LLOYD WRIGHT’S FERNDALE LEGACY

A familiar Ferndale landmark, Wetmore’s garage, on Woodward, has an architectural history that is virtually unknown to even the most dedicated Woodward cruiser. Owner Roy C. Wetmore in the early 1920s asked renowned architect Frank Lloyd Wright to design a combined service station and auto showroom. (Wetmore’s business was to house a Packard dealership for some years in addition to the service garage.) Wright completed the plans for the combined facility but his concept was not used in the building ultimately erected. In 1951, Wright presented designs for the remodeling of the existing building; some of his ideas, including those for the service desk area, were then incorporated in a way which suggested “the style of Wright.”\*

Since 1928 the combination of a wobbly-wheeled car in the building’s corner niche overlooking the Woodward/---intersection, topped by the inscribed Wetmore name, and the artillery wheel and tire embedded in the brick work, have remained one of the most effective garage advertisement configurations in southeastern Michigan.\*\* That Frank Lloyd Wright had a role in Wetmore history only adds to the mystique--and its special place in Ferndale’s past.

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*Sources consulted:* \* William Allin Storrer, *The Frank Lloyd Wright Companion* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1993): 370. \*\* Jerry Drenzek, “Old ‘Shaky’: Veteran Detroit Traffic Stopper,” *Cars and Parts* (undated clipping in Ferndale Historical Museum collection): 64. [A special thanks to Wetmore’s for supplying this information to the Museum staff.]



**Ferndale Wetmore Garage and Packard Dealership – 1920s**

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## MEMORIAL BOARD, 2008

Four new names have been added to the Memorial Board in the Museum: **Irving and Alice Johnson, Newton and Doris VanGiesen, Bert and Helen Van Giesen, and Kevin B. Curtin**, thanks to the generosity of **Eleanor and John Mielke**. These names join those of some 84 others who are honored as Ferndale residents of the past who, according to Historical Society Constitution and Bylaws, “resided, worked, or participated in organizational activities in the City of Ferndale.” Additions to the Memorial Board are always welcome. Emblem and engraving costs are \$35.00. Please contact **Frank Flores** (586-755-6599) for further information.

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**FERNDALE HOUSES (STILL STANDING) BUILT THE SAME YEAR AS  
FERNDALE'S FIRST CHURCH, THE TABERNACLE  
WAS CONSTRUCTED:  
1917**

<u>Street</u>	<u>Number of Houses</u>	<u>Street</u>	<u>Number of Houses</u>
Albany	3	Hyland	1
Allen	2	LaPrairie	1
Beaufield	1	Leroy	3
Bennett, W.	1	Maplehurst, E.	2
Breckenridge, E.	1	Maplehurst, W.	2
Cambourne, E.	2	Pearson	2
Drayton, W.	1	Saratoga, E.	1
Edgewood Pl.	1	Saratoga, W.	2
Fielding	2	St. Louis	2
Gardendale	1	Troy, W.	2
Hazelhurst, W.	2	Withington, W.	1
		Woodland, E.	1

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TOTAL: 37

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\* Table compiled from research on Ferndale's housing stock by Museum Volunteer, **Diane O'Neill**.

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**SOME THINGS TO CONSIDER ABOUT HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN FERNDALE?**

Many U.S. communities, including some of Ferndale's closest suburban neighbors, are slowly discovering the benefits of historic preservation. Included among reasons for considering historic preservation in community development, as outlined by nationally acclaimed urban planner, **Donovan D. Rypkema**, are: Cities, especially small cities, with significant historic rehabilitation have the most successful economic development. Such preservation attracts and retains small businesses because buildings are centrally located, near transportation, and it costs less to rehab than build. In summary: Preservation differentiates one community from another by preserving special characteristics, stimulates investment, tourism, property values, jobs for local labor, and dilutes property deterioration. Especially thought-provoking is Rypkema's view that tearing down a historic building for a parking lot is economically counter-productive.

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Source summarized: Donovan D. Rypkema, *The Economics of Historic Preservation: A Community Leader's Guide* (Washington DC: National Trust for Historic Preservation, 2005): *passim*.

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**A THANK-YOU TO A NEW MUSEUM VOLUNTEER!**

**Garry Andrews**, who began as a new volunteer at the Museum in November, has donated a large display case for the Museum Store area, a contribution gratefully welcomed by staff and city residents alike. Garry has also assumed responsibility for keeping the Historical Society's display case at City Hall up-to-date. In addition, he has undertaken the task of refurbishing and repositioning many of the key displays in the Museum's main exhibit area. His role as Treasurer and Public Relations Organizer, in addition to these activities, means that he is already an invaluable addition to the Society. We thank him for his many efforts and inspiration.

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**January 2008  
THE 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY OF THE FERNDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
--AND ITS LOCATION IN THE FORMER CANADIAN LEGION HALL**

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**FERNDALE'S SHORTEST STREET?  
Fairfield  
(off Hancock Court, which is off St. Louis)  
It has only two houses.**

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**PROJECT FERNDALE ARCHITECTURE: VOLUNTEERS STILL 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**, 284-548-5914.

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**THE FERNDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY BOARD AND VOLUNTEERS, 2008**

Changes on the Board of the Ferndale Historical Society were approved at the Society's annual meeting, November 29, 2007, Kulick Center. **Frank Flores**, former Trustee, assumed duties as Vice President, a position previously held by **Ray White** who now is a Trustee. **Garry Andrews** became Treasurer, replacing **Phyllis Hill** who retired; Garry also assumed the Communications/Public Relations role vacated by **Sherry Wells**. **Lynne Prudden** became the new Historian, a position formerly held by **Carolyn Steger**; Lynne also continues as Membership Chair.

Board members retaining office include **Roger Schmidt**, president; **Christine Kole**, Recording Secretary; **Jean Spang**, Corresponding Secretary; **Robert Bruner**, Trustee; and Board of Directors: **David Lungu**, **Eleanor Mielke**, and **Mary White**. Publication of the *Crow's Nest*, the Society newsletter, continues with **Jean Spang** as editor, and **Lynne Prudden** as graphics/production manager.

Volunteers regularly appearing on Monday and Wednesday workdays include **Garry Andrews**, **Betty Blank**, **Phyllis Hill**, **Lynne Prudden**, **Carol Schmidt**, and **Jean Spang**. The regular Saturday crew, from 2pm-4pm, includes **Diane O'Neill**, **Phyllis Hill**, and **Ray White**--soon to be joined by **Garry Andrews**. **Miriam Kelman** continues work on the Museum's digitization project, as do several **Wayne State University students** each term. A special thank you to all of these dedicated volunteers. The Society couldn't function without them!

Volunteers still needed especially for oral history projects and Project Ferndale Architecture!

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**THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY'S DISPLAY CASE AT CITY HALL**

Ferndale residents will have new opportunities to see exhibits covering various aspects of Ferndale History in the coming year. The exhibit case in the City Hall lobby is scheduled to be regularly changed to stimulate interest. **Please take a look!**



**Historical Society Display City Hall- December 2007**

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**Please Look Inside!**

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Page 5 Frank Lloyd Wright Legacy  
Page 6 Old Houses in Ferndale  
Page 7 Ferndale Historical Society Board & Volunteers, 2008

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**CALENDAR**

<b>Thursday, January 24, 6 pm</b>	<b>Historical Society Board Meeting, Kulick Center</b>
<b>Thursday, February 28, 6pm</b>	<b>Historical Society Board Meeting, Kulick Center</b>
<b>Thursady, March 27, 6pm</b>	<b>Historical Society Board Meeting Kulick Center</b>
<b>Thursday, April 24, 6pm</b>	<b>Historical Society Board Meeting Kulick Center</b>
<b>Thursday, May 22, 6pm</b>	<b>Historical Society Board Meeting Kulick Center</b>

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**First  
Class  
Mail**