

“ Preserving the heritage of Ferndale for future generations”

The Crow's Nest

Newsletter of the Ferndale Historical Society

Winter 2009

THE MIDLAND ADHESIVE COMPANY FIRE, DEATH AND DESTRUCTION, 1968

Roger Schmidt

Most tragedies can be traced to a series of events, often with one pivotal mistake that leads to disaster. The explosion and fire at Midland Adhesive was no different. In the end, one man would be dead and over \$355,000 in damage would be done to the business.

The company, at 2600 Goodrich, was owned by parent company Grow Chemical of Detroit. Through a blending process they made adhesives used primarily by the auto industry, in this case Ford Motor Co., for gluing trim, padding, and insulation in auto interiors. While many of their products were water based, some were made of highly flammable materials.

On the morning of December 11, a routine batch of adhesive was being prepared. Fifty-five gallons each of acetone, hexane, and methyl ethyl ketone were mixed with 450 pounds of neoprene rubber. Following an employee lunch break, more acetone and hexane were to be added.

At approximately 12:19pm, the building was torn apart by a violent explosion and subsequent fire ball. The blast was heard miles away and windows in nearby businesses were shattered. Every window in Turner Brothers Inc., next door, was blown out and a wall buckled. The entire east wall of the Midland plant disintegrated and a section of the roof flew skyward then crashed back down. A fire ball soared up over 100 feet in the air. Parts of the building were later found a quarter mile away. A cloud of dense black smoke momentarily obscured the building and a mist of chemicals rained down on the area. Employees in the lunch room ducked for cover then scrambled from the building as a sheet of flames swept over them. One man in the front office said the ceiling came down on top of him and the two women working there. All three escaped with only minor injuries.

When the call came in to fire headquarters, both engines from Station No. 2 and the aerial ladder from Headquarters Station were dispatched. Lieutenant Doyne Easterwood was in the lead engine from Station No. 2. Barely clear of the station and turning onto Nine Mile, he could see a large plume of smoke and immediately called on the radio for more help. He told the houseman on the desk to send all the remaining men and start a callback of the off-duty men.

Chief McMurray was home at lunch and heard the call. He left immediately and pulled up right behind the trucks. Without even leaving his car, he called the houseman and asked for an engine from Royal Oak and one from Hazel Park. Easterwood told him one employee was missing and rescue efforts were being made.

The missing employee, Montresse E. Brantley, age 27, of Detroit, father of two, had been last seen in the building. Since the entire building was ablaze and dangerously unstable, firefighters were unable to enter and make a search or rescue. Fellow employees spoke aloud that they hoped he had left for lunch or gone home.

Four pumpers supplied eight hand-held hose lines and the ladder pipe mounted atop the aerial truck. The first objective was to protect the exposures. This being done, for the next hour the men poured over 180,000 gallons of water on the fire.

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Midland Adhesive company Fire, 2600 Goodrich, December 11, 1968
Jerry Heiman, Photographer, *Detroit Free Press*, December 12, 1968

(continued from p. 1)

Numerous small explosions from drums stored in the building burst up from the wreckage making the men flinch, but by 1:30pm they began to go inside, moving carefully, extinguishing hot spots as they went. Then started the gruesome task of looking for what they feared would be a dead body, A large crowd of spectators had formed to watch. Newsmen and onlookers climbed a wobbly pile of pallets and fifty-five gallon drums stored nearby in order to access a rooftop view. Police had to chase them away. Others got permission to sit atop the Turner Brothers building.

Two front end loaders from the city yard were summoned. Scoop by scoop they dug into the rubble at the back of the building and cleared a path. As each scoop was dumped, the contents were carefully examined. Finally at 3pm a shoe fell out of one load. The loader stopped and digging by hand commenced. When nothing more was found the loader started again. Twenty minutes later one of the firemen raised his hand and the loader stopped again. They had located the torso of a body. The men covered it with a tarp. The State Police Crime Lab later confirmed it was Brantley.*

Three Midland Adhesive and six Turner Brothers employees were treated for minor injuries, mostly cuts from flying glass. Lieutenant Easterwood was treated for a hip injury, received when a section of wall fell on him, and firefighter Greg Horan suffered a laceration to his left ear when a steel window frame struck him. Two other firefighters received minor injuries.

Fire Inspector Ken Galbraith sifted carefully through the debris looking for clues. There was not much left, but many of his questions were answered by examining the machinery. Galbraith pointed out that the fumes from any of the chemicals being used, if brought into contact with a flame or spark, could cause such an explosion. He and Chief McMurray conducted interviews with all of the employees to try to solve the puzzle.

During questioning, one employee remembered seeing Brantley at lunch time. He said, "I looked in the door of the mixing room and he was standing next to a mixing vat. I yelled something to him and he turned to look at me. Then he just disappeared as the building blew apart." Another worker said he thought he saw Brantley, a known smoker, walking toward the area with a lighted cigarette. (*No Smoking* signs were posted throughout the building.) A third story had him walking through the room smoking a cigarette on his way to answer the telephone.

With the other reasonable sources eliminated, the cigarette theory was all that was left. Unfortunately, the one man who could answer that question was gone.

* Cited in *Daily Tribune*, December 12, 1968.

Note: If you would like to read more about the history of Ferndale's fire department you can purchase a copy of Chief Roger Schmidt's book, *Tough as Nails: A History of the Ferndale Fire Department*, for the discounted price of \$36.00 at the Ferndale Historical Museum. Mail orders accepted; shipping and handling is \$5.00. Please make checks payable to the Ferndale Historical Society.

Officers of the Ferndale Historical Society

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<i>Recording Secretary</i>	Christine Kole	<i>Treasurer</i>	Garry Andrews
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<i>Communications/Publicity</i>	Garry Andrews	<i>Board of Directors:</i>	Phyllis Hill, David Lungu, Eleanor Mielke, Mary White
<i>Trustees:</i>	Ray White; Robert Bruner, City Manager		



Having Fun in Ferndale, 1926

Betty Chesney goes for a ride, 224 W. Chesterfield. Source: Betty Chesney Barry

THE FERNDALE-OAK PARK BORDER WAR*

The demarcation line between Ferndale and Oak Park was not always a peaceful place. Well into the early 20th Century, part of Hubbard's Marsh, which extended from near 8 Mile Rd. to 11 Mile Rd., defined much of Ferndale's western border. During rainy seasons, the marsh was flooded and often impassable; for the rest of the year, the area was a smoldering peat bog that even into the 1930s emitted smells unforgettable to Ferndale residents.

Once drained in the 1930s as housing subdivisions were built, the marshy bog ceased to be the natural boundary between Ferndale and its immediate western neighbor, Oak Park. Streets became the new border. Ferndale incorporated as a village in 1917, then as a city in 1928; major street construction touching the new border was an immediate project. Meanwhile, Oak Park was incorporated as a town, 1927; but not as a city, with major street building projects, until 1947. Thus were the innocent beginnings of the border conflict.

Ferndale's Drayton Avenue (formerly Elmdale) was constructed in the 1920s. It was 29 feet wide and originally came to a dead end at the Oak Park line. By the late 1940s, to accommodate new home tracts, Oak Park had built a four-lane road, Oak Park Boulevard, which connected with the narrower Drayton, creating a traffic "funnel" between the two communities that often was a headache or relief to drivers, depending on traffic and which direction they were heading.

The funnel, in 1969, was ultimately the cause of Ferndale residents building what Oak Park residents called the "Berlin Wall." Barricades were erected on Drayton, Lewiston, and Earl Blvd., streets which corresponded to Oak Park Blvd., Kenwood, and Breckenridge in Oak Park. Ferndale's mayor Bruce Garbutt, city officials, and irate Ferndale residents said that the blockade was the only way to deal with the out-of-control congestion that made Drayton and surrounding routes impassable during busy hours.

Oak Park residents, concerned about safety and convenience, immediately showed up en masse at Ferndale's city hall with a petition of 1,860 signatures denouncing the barricade tactics. They also announced a boycott of Ferndale businesses. Four Lincoln Junior High School students picketed outside city hall. Several street fights, and a number of ruined lawns from drivers steering around the barricades, were reported before a solution was agreed upon by officials of both cities.

Enforcing speed limits, and encouraging parking on both sides of Oak Park Blvd. in Oak Park to make it seem more like a two-lane street coinciding with the narrower Drayton in Ferndale, ended the disagreement. The wall came down.

And peace was restored . . . at last.

*Sources consulted: Hubbard Marsh: *Maurice Cole*, *Ferndale of Yesteryear*, *Ferndale Historical Society*, 1971: 16.

Barricade controversy facts: "*Ferndale Firm Behind Barricades as Oak Park Attacks on 3 Fronts*," *Daily Tribune*, *September 9, 1969*: 1-2. [Note: Special thanks to "Charles," a faithful Museum visitor, for suggesting that research be done on the Ferndale-Oak Park border dissension.]



Ferndale City Manager J. William Little crossed over into Oak Park Monday to pose outside his city's "wall" on three streets leading into Oak Park. (Tribune Photo)

DURING THE DEPRESSION . . .

ANOTHER PURPLE GANG LEGACY*

The Volstead Act of 1919 prohibited the manufacture and sale of all wine, beer, and liquor in the U.S. But Detroit and environs proved to be a ready market for the production and consumption of illegal spirits, and fights-to-the-finish among local rivals for control of breweries, stills, and blind pig operations.

The Purple Gang, based near Detroit's Eastern Market, emerged the clear winner in manufacture and distribution operations--often at the cost of tribute and lives to those who would challenge their control. Some 500 murders were attributed to the Purple Gang's reign, which lasted well into the 1930s and stretched far along the Woodward corridor, including Ferndale and beyond. (Al Capone, based in Chicago, was one of their best customers.)

The rule of the Purple Gang, and its sometimes unexpected effects, remains a significant part of local history--especially for someone who attended Ferndale schools during the Depression:

THE INFAMOUS SHIRTS**

Curtis Smith

The Depression touched almost every aspect of life in 1930's Ferndale. The shirts my mother made for me remain my clearest recollection of those lean times. Made of a thick broadcloth, cut in a "serviceable" but shapeless pattern, those shirts looked nothing like the shirts the other boys at school wore, making me always feel "different" and out of place. Those shirts accompanied me through Roosevelt School, which at the time included grades through the eighth; then, through Lincoln High School (Class of January 1940). Years later, learning the origins of those shirts only added another dimension to the unhappy memory.

In the late 1920s a new family (name and street must remain anonymous even today) had moved in next door to us. My mother soon became good friends with the wife--whose husband was a shirt manufacturer. He made his own contacts and deliveries in Detroit, often taking his wife and my mother with him "for company" on the ride.

Among his best customers were the leaders of the Purple Gang, the rum-runner mobsters who plied their trade along the Woodward corridor: He made their specially-crafted silk shirts. Conducting business with his clients at the Gang's headquarters, in a "seedy part of Detroit," followed a strict pattern, my mother recalled: Mr. Shirt Manufacturer would pull up to the large building, leaving his two lady passengers in the car. He would then enter the building to take the customer's measurements or make deliveries. Soon a "seedy-looking" character, cigarette dangling from his lip, would appear at the building entrance and lounge against the door, following orders from the Gang leader to "check that the ladies remained safe" while the shirt business was transacted.

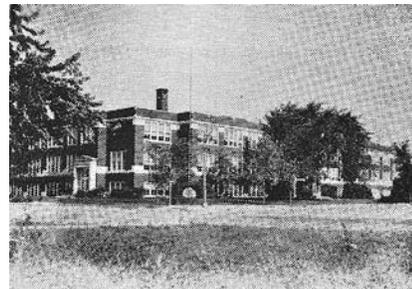
It wasn't until I was well into my teens that I had a store-bought shirt. And only then did I fully understand the true origins of those home-made shirts I had been forced to wear for most of my school years. The broadcloth my mother used, purchased at a price the Smiths could afford, had come from our next-door neighbor--the same source as the silk shirts supplied to the Purple Gang. Even more disconcerting: All of this time, the Gang was rumored to have had a hideout on Pinecrest near Eight Mile Rd. in Ferndale--not far from where my family lived.

Needless to say, those shapeless shirts and their association with the Purple Gang forever defined for me what it meant to grow up during the Depression.

* Source consulted: Susan Whitall, "Purple Gang's Bloody Legacy," Detroit News, June 9, 2001. ** Summarized from Curt Smith oral history interview, October 16, 2008 [interviewer: Jean Spang].



Roosevelt



Lincoln High

IN FERNDALE

DURING THE 1940s AND '50s . . .

SNAKES AND SNAILS, AND PUPPY-DOG TAILS*

Jack B. Weber

Looking back on my life spanning the 1940s and '50s, I am reminded of the great merriment and mayhem with which I was involved.

In my kindergarten year, I was the prototype of a nasty little boy. Twice, after being punished for bad behavior at Washington School, I was ordered into the cloak room (where the coats and such were hung--no lockers in those days). I proceeded to extract myself from said room and walk home (three blocks). Needless to say, my dear mum took me back each time (ear in hand) to face the music.

As I matured (in the fourth and fifth grades), I became the captain of the safety patrol. What a guy. Also a cub scout. What a guy again. The best part of the safety deal was raising our stars and stripes each morning in front of the school and taking it down at the end of classes each day. I considered it an honor.

Then on to Taft School for the sixth grade. As part of our civics classroom activity, we voted in a mock election during the Presidential election of 1948: Harry Truman(?) versus Thomas Dewey. A process taken very seriously by all, with one exception: Moi! All others in the class voted for Harry Truman. It figured that I was the only one who would vote for Tom Dewey. I had no idea who Mr. Tom Dewey was. However, I did like the name because of Donald Duck's nephews--Huey, Dewey, and Louie.

I finally made it over to Lincoln High. There my years were filled with sports, girls, parties, going steady, mayhem, playing the Woodward Avenue Drive-In restaurant game, etc.--and working at part-time jobs along Nine Mile. All my friends, our gang of misfits, also kept busy with never-ending pranks pulled on each other, the teachers, the principal, the counselors, and the local authorities.

Foremost among our group in the mayhem category were two brothers. Their family owned a dog named "Mandy," a wee terrier breed. She drank beer and whatever else made it into her water bowl. A real trouper. Mandy was a prominent member of our gang. One fine day, Mandy was arrested by the dog catcher and hauled off to the pound. She, along with other canine prisoners, was incarcerated in a fenced area behind the police station (then located on the north side of Nine Mile, near Woodward), the "doggy prison," as we called it. An ingenious plan to spring Mandy from "the joint" was hatched. One dark and dreary night, her two owners climbed the fence, managed to make an opening, and Mandy was free! And so were the other four-legged prisoners. A classic prison break! Mandy lived to drink beer again. She was ever grateful and lived happily ever after.

Ah, Mr. Walter, Mr. Houghton, Ms. Jorgensen, Ms. Hammond, Mr. Sabourin, Mr. Wall, Mr. Pollack, Ms. Elsie May Harper, Ms. Maxwell, Mr. Ford, Otto Brown, Mr. Wolter, Mr. Strang, Lefty Brandt, Ted Meisner, Roy Burkhart, Gus Hanson, and Mr. A.K. Gardner--the staff at Lincoln H.S.! A.K. Gardner, the smallest teacher I ever met: "Awww right, you big guys, knock it off!" he'd say. As for Ms. Elsie May Harper, she made me redo my term paper on prehistoric cave paintings in France in two days-- after she caught me copying verbatim some passages from a few reference books. I also had to carry her basket purse, a very large one, from class to class with her by my side for a week, as punishment. Oh the pain of it all! Still, I list her today as one of my honor roll teachers.

Yes, an innocent time it was, the 1940s and '50s: Our gang of kids played street games each night until dark. We never locked the doors to the house at night. The family car was left in the driveway with the keys in the ignition. Then, as now, I considered myself one lucky youth to have existed during that never-to-come-again era of the mid-20th Century.

*Excerpted and edited from a manuscript by Jack Weber (Lincoln High School, Class of 1954), *Snakes and Snails and Puppy-dog Tails: Memories of Growing up in Ferndale, Michigan* (November 2008), in the Ferndale Historical Museum Archives.



Washington



Taft

THE LINCOLN MURAL RESTORED

The Ferndale Historical Society is about to receive a very special piece of history. Ferndale Public Schools officials have announced plans to donate Lincoln High School's famous "Lincoln Mural" to the Museum at a ceremony commemorating Abraham Lincoln's 200th birthday, February 12th. The 44" x 117" piece of artwork, commemorating Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, graced the school's main hallway, 1929-1959, and remains a familiar memory to generations of Lincoln High School students.

Painted by five LHS students under the direction of their teacher, the mural was rendered in a particular type of casein paint and in a pattern and style common to Works Progress Administration artists during the Depression. It was a gift to the school by the Class of 1929.

In 2005, almost 50 years after the school was torn down, an anonymous donor left the frayed, rolled-up canvas at the Museum. Staff soon transferred it to the Ferndale Public Schools as the rightful owner--who then raised funds to restore the badly damaged piece. Now completed, Schools officials have decided that the Museum is the most appropriate place to display this icon of Ferndale history.

A heartfelt thank-you to Ferndale Public Schools for this important addition to the Museum collections. And, from the Ferndale Historical Museum, a special welcome to Lincoln High School students who want to revisit a unique reminder of their high school's hallway.



The Lincoln Mural, main hallway, Lincoln High School, 1929-1959. Gift, Lincoln High School, Class of 1929. LHS Artists: Ivy Booth, Elsa Goodyear, Rosemary Wexley, John Norton, and Stuart Friedrich. Teacher: Rosemary Lawrence. Credit: Ferndale Historical Museum Archiv



*Edgar a. Culbertson, Class of 1954
As pictured in the 1951 Lincoln High School Log (yearbook)*

DISCOVERING A HERO: EDGAR A. CULBERTSON BOATSWAIN MATE 1ST CLASS, U.S. COAST GUARD

A recent inquiry at the Ferndale Historical Museum from the U.S. Coast Guard is a reminder that, all too often, heroes may be little recorded in hometown resources. In September 2008 a U.S. Coast Guard officer called the Museum seeking information on Petty Officer Edgar Culbertson who had died in 1967 while attempting to save the lives of three boys during one of the worst storms ever recorded on Lake Superior at Duluth, Minnesota. His information indicated that Petty Officer Culbertson had been born in Ferndale.

It was only after some diligent searching, guided by preliminary information provided by the inquiring officer, one internet source, and various local records dating back to the 1930s, that Museum staff were able to identify the Culbertson family, some of whom still live in southeastern Michigan. In turn, the Museum staff was alerted to the honor, the Coast Guard Medal, that was awarded posthumously to Edgar Culbertson--and notified that a bronze plaque, originally placed on the pier where he lost his life in 1967, had recently been reinstalled on a new pier, a fitting memorial to the "only known member of the U.S. Coast Guard to lose his life in Duluth in service to his country and community."* The concluding sentence of this citation reads: "His outstanding courage, intrepidity, initiative, and unselfish actions were in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Coast Guard."*

Locating such information for the historical records of Ferndale remains one of the most important --and satisfying--missions of the Ferndale Historical Museum staff.

* Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Edgar_Culbertson. Retrieved December 9, 2008.

**FROM THE DIRECTOR:
NOTES OF SPECIAL INTEREST ABOUT THE YEAR 2008 AT THE MUSEUM**

Volunteers logged over 2,700 hours of work at the Museum in duties including research activities, archive maintenance, web site monitoring, oral history recording, display set-up, docent responsibilities, and newsletter preparation. **Betty Blank, Lisa Harteau, Phyllis Hill, Dianne O'Neill, Lynne Prudden, Jean Spang, and Carol Schmidt** deserve special mention for their dedicated efforts in such Museum operations.

Some 781 guests visited the Museum, including six class reunions. Lincoln High School's Class of 1948, celebrating its 60th anniversary, set the record as the "oldest" class to visit. The Society also provided a display of historical memorabilia commemorating Ferndale High School's 50th anniversary Homecoming Game.

The Society's new website, ably maintained by volunteer **David Lungu**, has made the Museum available worldwide. The most recent queries have come from France and Germany. Many inquiries were related to genealogical research and local family histories pre- and post World War II. Research assistance has also been provided to students in various specialties.

The Ferndale Public Library gave the Museum their one-of-a-kind microfilm collection of the 1927-79 span of the *Ferndale Gazette-Times*--which the Museum staff, once funds are available, plans to digitize for public use. At present, purchase of a microfilm reader is an immediate goal.

Project Ferndale Architecture, the photographing of Ferndale's 8,000 structures, continues in earnest. The diligent work of **Beth Breneau** on this important project to document the city's unique architectural stock has earned her the profound respect of Museum staff.

The New Year promises many more opportunities for the Museum staff and new volunteers to serve Ferndale and its residents by "preserving the heritage of Ferndale for future generations."

Please check that your Society membership is up to date. We look forward to seeing you at the Museum. New volunteers are always welcome. And thank you for your interest in Ferndale history!

Garry Andrews, Director

MUSEUM ARCHIVES: LOOKING FOR NAMES OF FERNDALE RESIDENTS WHO SERVED IN WORLD WAR I, KOREA, AND VIETNAM . . .

Museum files already list names of Ferndale's World War II veterans, but a complete listing of World War I, Korea, and Vietnam military personnel from Ferndale is still in progress. Please contact the Museum if you can provide names (and a short biography) of veterans who served during these three conflicts. By doing so, you will have helped immeasurably to document an important record of Ferndale veterans.

(Phone: 248-545-7606; e-mail: www.ferndalehistoricalsociety.org)

THE TUCKER APPEARS IN FERNDALE, 1948!*

Attention, Dream Cruisers. Yes, the Tucker, product of one of America's strangest auto industry manufacturing sagas, made one known appearance in Ferndale. It was on view--briefly--at the Higgins Pontiac dealership (Woodward at W. Lewiston) in 1948.

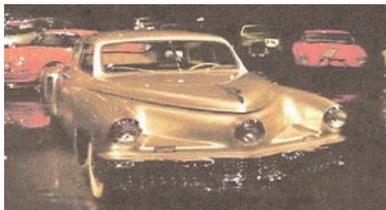
Preston Tucker, a Chicago entrepreneur who sought to take advantage of the U.S. government's sell-off of World War II factories, envisioned a "safety" car with "style": rear engine, disc brakes, fuel injection, all instruments on the steering wheel, a padded dashboard, and a special crash-proof frame. Engine problems, along with other design difficulties, ultimately required major changes in this innovative plan. The car, with its trademark center headlight, failed to start at its first public unveiling in 1947. But, after retooling and addressing major financial problems, Tucker took "pre-production models on the road to show them in towns across the U.S." Higgins Pontiac in Ferndale was one of the stops.

Only 51 Tuckers were manufactured (48 are still owned by collectors; one sold recently for over \$1 million). In 1949, the company ultimately folded amid charges of fraud and Tucker's claims that the Big 3 had sabotaged his efforts.

As for Bill Neef,** a Ferndale resident who viewed the Tucker at Higgins Pontiac in 1948, the "Cyclops center headlight that turned with the steering" remains the most vivid memory of that day at the Higgins showroom.

Sources: *Photo and information about the Tucker is from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1948_Tucker_Sedan. Retrieved November 11, 2008.

** Bill Neef, letter to Jean Spang [Ferndale Historical Museum], September 20, 2008.



A 1948 Tucker Sedan at the Blackhawk Auto Museum.

