



The Crow's Nest

NEWSLETTER OF THE FERNDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Winter 2011

FERNDALE 48220: THE SHORT HISTORY OF LOCAL MAIL DELIVERY

Jean Spang

Life for residents in the Village of Ferndale in 1918, the first year of its incorporation, meant that, with the exception of a paved Woodward and a "cindered" Nine Mile, all streets were sand and, depending on the time of year, often impassable. In addition, only well water was available. Outhouses were common. Proper drainage was non-existent. No gas heat was to be had, and there were only four telephones in the whole town. Fewer than half of the 400 homes had electric lights. The population totaled some 1,600 residents, but 85 of them were men in active service in World War I.

There was no local post office. Because of the poor condition of Ferndale streets, any mail delivery, through the nearest Detroit branch post office, Highland Park, was made to mail boxes that stood in long rows along Woodward and Nine Mile. Residents had to walk to these boxes to retrieve their letters. In the worst weather even the mailman had trouble getting to them, sometimes requiring a one-horse two-wheel sulky to navigate Woodward and Nine Mile. Of all the other amenities that were soon introduced to make Ferndale an attractive modern city, tracing the growth of local mail service, from its early connections to Detroit to the establishment of the Ferndale Post Office, provides a unique perspective on Ferndale's modest origins.

In the earliest days of the 1800s, mail arriving through Detroit via the Detroit River by steamboat was the only means of "reliable" communication for southeastern Michigan. The Detroit Post Office, initiated by the British, opened in 1803, and until after 1812 was the only post office in the Michigan Territory. The Territory, which had been established by the federal government in 1805, included Wisconsin. Subsequent construction of Territorial roads, such as Woodward, allowed access and a fledgling mail service into and from Michigan's large interior. By 1816 the cost of a single-sheet letter, address on its front, and sealed with a dab of wax (no envelope allowed) was 6 cents for 30 miles and 10 cents for 30 to 80 miles.

By 1820 a regular postal route from Detroit to Mt. Clemens via Pontiac and other parts of the Territory had begun. Four-horse coaches were required to transport mail to these post offices, where customers would stand in line to pick up or send mail. In bad weather, special carriers with large leather mail pouches and using snowshoes were pressed into service. For settlements 10 to 30 miles from Detroit, mail delivery was irregular, expensive, and often non-existent until more settlers moved into these areas and an increasing number of newspaper editors in such regions demanded better service. By 1834 daily mails came from both the east and Michigan's interior, and more railroad lines soon carried mail, allowing more service to Oakland County. *(continued next page)*



Photo: Commemorative envelope, Dedication of the Ferndale Post Office, August 28, 1937, from Ferndale Historical Museum Archives.

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By 1835 Pontiac was a major post office. Envelopes for letters were allowed by 1840. As late as 1843 mail took some 19 days to reach Detroit from New York. On March 3, 1847, the legislature approved stamps to prepay postage in 5 cent and 10 cent denominations. But only after the Civil War was regular home delivery offered in the more populated areas of southeastern Michigan. To facilitate mail delivery in Ferndale, by 1920 the Village Council had required that some Ferndale street names be changed to avoid name duplication in nearby communities (e.g., Campbell Rd. became Hilton Rd.).

Not until the early 1920s, when entrepreneurs began to see Nine Mile as a potential central business district, would Ferndale have its own post office. Wilfred Ostrander in 1924 erected a large office/business building (Numbers 164-204) on the north side of Nine Mile, just west of Woodward, and convinced the Detroit postmaster to lease space for a Ferndale post office branch. It opened, complete with pot-bellied stove, on August 28, 1924 at 188 W. Nine Mile, with John W. Allison as its postmaster. Only when local roads were improved in the mid-1920s was regular home delivery a possibility on all streets in Ferndale.

By 1936, residents of Ferndale, incorporated as a city in 1928, wanted their own post office. With the help of Congressman George A. Dondero, a native of Royal Oak Township, a lot at the Woodward/Troy corner, site of the Baptist Chapel, was purchased from the Detroit Baptist Union. (The Baptist Chapel was then moved to a site on Nine Mile, west of Pinecrest, and was later the home of the Ferndale Women’s Club, a building since demolished.) Dedication of the new Ferndale Post Office took place on August 26, 1937. Edward Damaschke was the postmaster; all Ferndale’s city officials and a large crowd attended the opening ceremonies.

The Ferndale Post Office still functions today, having in its over 70-year history accommodated air mail, self-stick stamps, Zip codes, overnight delivery, priority mail, and stamps honoring Elvis Presley. Regular home delivery in “rain, sleet, and gloom of night” is a given.

But one of the striking ironies of Ferndale history is that, although the Post Office, as in 1937, still stands at 22681 Woodward, a new “United States Postal Service Contract Unit,” a mini post office, opened in 2010 in the Dollar Castle, at what is now 200 W. Nine Mile Rd.—the site of the former Kresge’s Dime Store, which from September 7, 1938 through the 1980s, occupied the site next door to Ferndale’s original 1924 post office in the Ostrander Building. (A fire on September 19, 1975 destroyed the Ostrander Building, which was separated from Kresge’s by a fire wall.)

A post office on Nine Mile? Does history repeat itself?

Sources consulted: *Ferndale history/statistics: Maurice F. Cole, Ferndale of Yesteryear (Ferndale Historical Society, 1971): 32, 90; Ferndale Gazette, August 26, 1937 (unattributed, unpagged clippings in the Historical Museum archives); “New Kresge 5 & 10 Opens Wednesday,” Ferndale Gazette, September 1, 1938: 1; Robert L. Nicholson in Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek and Gerry Kulick ed. Old Timers Tell It Like It Was (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 90; Richard D. Raddant, “A Half Century of Progress,” Daily Tribune, April 25, 1950. Capt. Roger Schmidt, Tough as Nails: A History of the Ferndale Fire Department (Ferndale Historical Society, 2004): 151-156. Mail Service in Michigan: George Newman Fuller, Economic and Social Beginnings of Michigan: A Study of the Settlement of the Lower Peninsula during the Territorial Period, 1805-1837 (Lansing MI: Wynkoop Hallenbeck Crawford Co., State Printers, 1916: 13; Ralph R. Tingley, “Postal Service in Michigan Territory,” in Michigan History, Vol. 35, No. 4, December 1951: 448, 453, 455; Melvin W. Wachs, “Postal History of Detroit: 1701-1948,” in Michigan History, Vol. 35, No. 4, December 1951: 352-354 passim.*

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FERNDALE'S LAST CIVIL WAR VETERAN: FRANCIS M. SOCKMAN, 1844-1938

Memorial Day celebrations in Ferndale during the late 1920s/1930s paid special homage to Francis M. Sockman, the city's last surviving veteran of the Civil War. At these ceremonies, and at various meetings of the local VFW Paul Hornaday Post, he was often asked to relate his war experiences. His vivid recollections offered Ferndale residents a stark reminder of one of the country's most fateful times.

Born August 11, 1844 in a log cabin in Marshal County in what is now West Virginia, Sockman volunteered for the Union Army in 1864. He served first as a member of Company C, 12th Volunteer Infantry of West Virginia. Later, under orders from Major General John Gibbons, he was transferred to Company C, 10th Infantry—a company that was to play a major role in the final battles leading to the end of the war.

Sockman was in three campaigns and fought in five battles in the Shenandoah Valley. After a battle at Lynchburg VA, his band crossed the James River in the spring of 1865 and joined General George Meade's army in a campaign that ultimately led to the capture of the city of Petersburg on April 3rd. This victory was key to the capture of the capital of the Confederacy, Richmond, on the same day, a defining turn in the war.

But Sockman's part in Meade's campaign ended on April 2nd, one week before General Robert E. Lee surrendered at Appomattox on April 9th. He had been wounded in the hard-fought battle to take control of Fort Gregg, a Confederate military stronghold that protected Petersburg.

While recovering in a military hospital, he heard the news of President Abraham Lincoln's assassination, April 15, 1865. Ferndale's Memorial Day celebration attendees later were to recall Sockman's vivid descriptions of Lincoln as his ideal president, "the best ever."

Awarded a Class I medal for his service, Sockman was honorably discharged from the Union Army in Fortress Monroe VA, July 22, 1865. He then returned to West Virginia, married Celina Richmond on April 12, 1866, and they moved to a farm at Moundville WV. He and Celina had eight children: James, Nathaniel, Margaret, George, Leota, Laura, Frank, and Wylie.

Eventually the Sockmans moved to Washington PA, then to Detroit where they lived at 422 Tennessee Avenue. In 1916, Celina died: burial was at Woodmere Cemetery, Detroit.

Francis M. Sockman died on January 29, 1938 at 235 W. Cambourne, where he had resided for some 13 years with his son Wylie, an autoworker. The Reverend L.H. Pertner of the local Zion Lutheran Church officiated at the services; burial was at Woodmere Cemetery, Detroit.

Well-known in the city, Ferndale's last participant in the war that changed U.S. history had long had an honored place in local history.

Sources consulted: "Death Takes Civil War Veteran, 92," Obituary provided by Patricia Ryan to either the Daily Tribune or the Ferndale Gazette in 1938, unpaginated and exact date not cited, in archives of the Ferndale Historical Museum. [Ed. Note: Sockman birthdates vary in these records, variously cited, 1844, 1845, 1846.] Ulysses S. Grant, Personal Memoirs (New York: Charles Webster & Co., 1885): (Vol. 2) 450; 454-461. "12th West Virginia Infantry: Francis M. Sockman, Company C, Descendants of Francis M. Sockman" (contributors: Karen Hucko, Linda Fluharty, T. Vernon Anderson) at website: <http://www.lindapages.com/wvcw/12wvi/12-fmsockman.htm>, retrieved 10/10/1010; portrait photo, courtesy this website. Additional photo of Sockman at the Ferndale Memorial Parade: unattributed, undated copy in the Ferndale Historical Museum Archives.



Francis M. Sockman
Member of the Union Army,
Ferndale's Last Civil War Veteran



Francis M. Sockman at a Ferndale Memorial Parade, late 1920s/early 1930s

THE PORTER SCHOOL: WOODWARD AVENUE AT NINE MILE ROAD AND BEYOND*

Maurice Cole

A map of Oakland County published in 1857 shows that the first school house for District Number 9 (what was to become the Ferndale School District) was located on the south side of Nine Mile Rd., one quarter mile east of present day Livernois, which would be at about Allen today.

Fifteen years later a map gives the Woodward/Nine Mile corner as the site of the local school. Based on a history of Oakland County published in 1877, it appears that the school at Nine Mile/Allen had been destroyed by fire in 1873. It is assumed, therefore, that the Porter School was built in the early 1870s--on the southeast corner of Woodward/Nine Mile. The new site was donated by local farmer Andrew C. Porter, and the ground "tastefully embellished by the setting out of shade-trees around its margin."

The Porter School faced Woodward (present site of the Ferndale Center Building). It was a frame structure, with two entrances, one for boys and one for girls, with a belfry on the top which housed the school bell. Outhouses were located at the rear of the school, while the woodshed was at the northeast corner of the building. There was a well for drinking water. (While excavating on Woodward for the basement of the present Macole Building the contractor broke into a former cistern of abnormal size, possibly the school well.) The belfry was not part of the original structure, but soon after 1896 one was added.

The school was heated by stove. (Letting out the wood contract for the school year was an annual consideration at school board meetings.) It was the job of the teacher to build the fire before opening the school each morning. She was also the janitress, and beginning in 1909, when her regular monthly salary was thirty-four dollars, she was to get an additional nine dollars for the janitor work.

In 1889 the Porter School was in operation for nine months of the year. The next year, however, the board reduced the term to eight months "to Comence [*sic*] the first Monday in October five months Winter and two weeks vacation and three Months Summer to be taught by a Lady." In fact, lady teachers were specified each year and Miss Josie Dennen filled that position for seven consecutive years, from 1889 through 1895, at a top salary of one hundred sixty dollars, twenty dollars a month.

Within the next decade, the area was beginning to feel the effects of Henry Ford's industrial activities in Highland Park, and many new families were moving into South Oakland County. The old Porter School, with its one room, was fast proving inadequate, and new school facilities were immediately necessary. Two new schools were proposed: one in the Ridge Road area (present site of Roosevelt School), and one on land where the Porter School stood. The Porter School, with its belfry removed, was relocated to a site on Nine Mile at Livernois which had been purchased for the erection of Lincoln High School.

The replacement for the Porter School, the newly built Ferndale School, with the large park remaining in front of it, faced Woodward. Tragedy struck almost immediately: An early morning fire just after Christmas 1914 burned the new school to the ground. The old Porter building was to serve as the district's emergency school until the new Ferndale School (later named the Central School) could be rebuilt. (School District Administration Offices, the Ferndale Public Library, and later the Foley Mansfield Law Offices, would occupy the former Central School. The present Ferndale Center Building was erected, in the school's park area on Woodward, in 1927.)

A significant reminder of early Ferndale history, the Porter School remained as an "annex" to the Lincoln High (later Lincoln Junior High School) building from the 1920s until the late 1950s. In January 1979 the Lincoln property was cleared to make way for a commercial enterprise (a supermarket and parking lot)--and progress.



**Source: Summarized/edited from Maurice Cole, "The Porter School," in Ferndale of Yesteryear (Ferndale Historical Society, 1971): 25-27. Cole cites various primary sources, including maps/atlasses prepared by Beers (1872), Hess (1877); Royal Oak Township school district history by Evart (1877); Porter School memories by Cline and Hough; School Board Proceedings (1890); Teacher contract records (1909); School Board minutes (1889-1905). Photo: Courtesy Otto Reich, in the Cole book, p.25.*

In Honor of Ferndale's Golden Jubilee. 1968

FERNDALE YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND TOMORROW

Colleen Carter, Grade 7, St. James School

Swamps and mud it used to be.
Then it advanced to flowers and trees.
Roads and trails were used for walking,
Indian smoke signals did the talking.

Cars and trucks and telephones too
Made life easier for me and for you.
Computers and robots will soon run the show
And humans will always be on the go.

Yet, it never will change, it never will die,
For the spirit of Ferndale lives in any ol' guy.
It's the flame of friendship that burns within,
And the fire of love lives on and on.

People have been here for fifty years--
With their joys and sorrows,
Their smiles and tears.

Now in nineteen-hundred-sixty-eight
Our Golden Jubilee takes place!

**FERNDALE'S GOLDEN JUBILEE PARADE, OCTOBER 12, 1968:
SCENES FROM NINE MILE**



Photos: Ferndale Gazette (October 14, 1968)

A FERNDALE AIR RAID ALERT, WORLD WAR II, 1943

August of 1943 was an uncertain time for America. An account, summarized from the *Ferndale Gazette*, August 12th, describes an emergency air-raid drill in Ferndale, one way that city officials prepared city residents for the worst. Each block in the city had its own Air Raid Warden, responsible for reporting any damage or injuries from “bombs” and, during black-outs, for checking that all lights were extinguished.

In a dramatic and realistic air alert, approximately 550 members of the Ferndale Civilian Defense Corps demonstrated their skills and functions here Tuesday night.

Not content with being the target of “bombs” which were to drop from Civil Air Patrol planes as part of the mock air raid, Ferndale Civilian Defense members created their own “incidents” to add to the graphic exhibition of their manifold activities.

Operating under the direction of Commander Maurice F. Cole, the entire organization swung into action with the sounding of the blue signal at 7 o’clock. From then until 8:30 o’clock, when the all-clear sounded, Ferndale took on the appearance of a city under attack by enemy planes.

Commander Cole reported that it was one of the most successful demonstrations staged by the corps and that the public, which was supposed to react much as it would if the “bombs” contained high explosives, gas or incendiary materials, co-operated to make the test one of the best staged here.

It took on all the drama of a city under attack, though householders did not leave their homes to seek the aid of their wardens but remained indoors during the red period from 7:48 to 7:58pm. The paper bombs dropped on the city were reported when they fell.

The control center of the Corps was a scene of warlike activity as the various executives sat at their stations handing their assignments. The local defense organization developed 20 of their own “incidents,” a word used to describe various injury or damage situations.

At his desk Maurice Cole directed the operations of his various officers and aides. Beside him was Adeline Briggs who plotted the incidents on a map of the city after the casualty and damage reports were received from air raid wardens who phoned from their stations to Mrs. Frank Prowse and Mrs. Jacob Leiber who were “in-telephonists.” Nell Nancy served as a “pinner,” keeping track of the locations of various squads who called for assistance from various parts of the city.

Jay Gibbs dispatched rescue and road repair squads to sections of the city where streets were “blown up” and water mains broken. Rescue squads saved two families trapped in bombed buildings. Four calls were received for streets damaged, which were roped off to add to the realism. Two calls asked for repair of broken water mains.

Beside Gibbs sat Winifred Donal, medical assistant, who dispatched ambulances and stretcher squads. Five “injured” were treated. Most serious of the “incidents” was the “bombing” of the evacuation station at St. Luke’s Church, Livernois and W. Lewiston, which required the evacuation of the patients to the main hospital at Lincoln High School.

Herbert Neale directed gas squads to scenes where gas “bombs” were reported. Irene Watt kept a log of the various “incidents” as they were reported. Chief Air Raid Warden Harold Wright relayed casualty and damage reports from his wardens. Marvin Steffens directed utility repair. Fire Chief Pritchard answered six calls during the alert.

Civil Air Patrol fliers, who “bombed” the city with paper bombs, added a touch of grim humor to the evening’s program. One “bomb” landed on the roof of the building where the control room was located, which for security reasons cannot be revealed; several incendiary “bombs” also were reported to have fallen in front of the building.

FAMILIAR WWII SYMBOLS ON THE LOCAL HOME FRONT:



World War II: What To Do If There Is An Air Raid Alarm--Civil Defense Instructions, City of Ferndale

1. Above all, keep calm, avoid panic and confusion, and obey instructions.
2. Don't rush into the street to see what is happening.
3. If at home or place of employment stay there. Take in passersby—they need shelter, too.
4. Stay away from windows. Do not stand in doorways, hallways, etc. Take refuge in basement.
5. Have flashlights handy in case electric lines are damaged.
6. Provide access to attic and roof so fires can be extinguished.
7. If on street, take cover in nearest available good basement or shelter.
8. If in car, park at once, being certain to leave lanes open for police and fire apparatus and ambulances. Turn off ignition and lights, remove keys, but leave doors unlocked. Seek shelter. Avoid parking at street intersections, in front of police and fire stations, hospital entrances or fire hydrants.
9. Buses, street cars, taxicabs, etc. should unload passengers as near as possible to best shelter.
10. During all BLUE and RED air raid signal periods, and for some time following the ALL CLEAR, do not use the telephone except in extreme emergencies.

From Our Director

It is my sincere hope that all of our members had an enjoyable Holiday season. This past year we lost some people that played integral roles within the Historical Society at one time or another: **Ray White, Betty Blank, and John Mielke**. These individuals will be greatly missed and remembered fondly.

The Museum has had a long overdue makeover. New paint, hardware and other accessories have made the Museum a gem once again. I thank all of the volunteers who spent valuable time with me on this project. A special thank-you to volunteer **Frank Flores** who put many hours into painting the building and accessories as well as cleaning and installing fixtures and a new sign in front of the building. The sign, at the suggestion of Frank, was dedicated to the memory of past Ferndale Historical Society President, Ray White.

The Board of the Society is reviewing the By-Laws of the Historical Society for possible revisions.

Please check that your membership is current so there will be no delays in your receiving future newsletters. We now have for sale the newly designed 2011 Historical Society calendar, featuring many vintage photographs of Ferndale's past. Cost: \$20.00. Get yours today!

Regards,
Garry Andrews, Museum Director

A DAY AT LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL, 1943*

The school day of the average student of Lincoln (let's call him Bob) begins, of course, with getting up. Bob used to get up at seven, but now he gets up fifteen minutes earlier for a very special reason. He must walk three or four blocks out of his way to meet his girl, Nancy.

After a very pleasant walk to school, Bob still can't bear to part with Nancy, so they stand outside her first hour classroom and talk. They don't realize how fast the time has gone until the bell starts ringing—then Bob breaks all speed records in order to get to his room at the other end of the hall before the bell stops ringing.

As soon as he gets into class, however, Bob is met by very bad news. The teacher hands back the tests the class took the day before and Bob has received an "E" on his. But, instead of listening to the teacher to find out what he did wrong, he just sits there, doodling and thinking of Nancy.

After study period has started, he and Nancy send notes to each other all during the period and sometimes go up to the dictionary together. Every time Nancy goes up the aisle to the dictionary, though, Bob gets a little competition from the "wolves." These "wolves" watch every girl that goes up the aisle and, as you may notice in the picture, their necks are built on a swivel so that if they see a very pretty girl they can turn their heads completely around. "Wolves" of this variety can be found almost anywhere during a school day: there are always a few in front of Lincoln Hall before school starts, maybe one or two in each classroom, and of course a whole pack of them inhabit that den known as "Barte's."

After study and the danger of the "Wolves" has passed, Bob comes down to Nancy's locker after he gets his coat but is surprised to find she is not there. "Of course, now I remember," thinks Bob. "Today is Wednesday and she'll have to stay for a Log meeting. Well, I'll go up and wait." After waiting for an hour and a half Bob begins to wonder whether she will ever get out; so he asks Mrs. Harper, "Will Nancy be finished soon?"

Mrs. Harper replies, "You might as well go home now because the Log is approaching its deadline and everyone must stay un til he gets some work done."

At this Bob walks dejectedly away and starts home alone, feeling downhearted but remembering that he will see the light of his life in the morning.



* Source: Unattributed author and artist in the *Lincoln Log* [Lincoln High School yearbook], June 1943, p. 17.

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Calendar of Events:

Thursday, January 27, 2011, 6pm	Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome
Thursday, February 24, 2011, 6pm	Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome
Thursday, March 24, 2011, 6pm	Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome

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“Preserving the Heritage of Ferndale for Future Generations”