



The only publication dedicated to the history and heritage of Oakland County  
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405 Cesar E. Chavez Avenue, Pontiac, Michigan 48342

### PRESIDENT'S LETTER

I hope this letter finds everyone well and enjoying the rest after the holidays. During the past year we have made many improvements to the property at Pine Grove and we plan to continue with our projects. In the spring we will be replacing the ramp leading to the carriage house with one that will be more attractive and easier to maintain. We also have plans to add some walkways from the driveway to the schoolhouse and to the entrance to the Wisner House, which will make it safer and more convenient for our visitors.

This year we are planning more events and programs to increase the public awareness of Pine Grove Center. We will be returning with the ice cream social in the summer and Victorian Christmas during the winter season. Other events are being planned as you will see from the *Upcoming Events* column that is on page 2. We are arranging for several small lecture programs on a variety of subjects to be offered throughout the year. This is an ambitious undertaking and we will need many volunteers to assist with planning, promotion and help on the event days.

Please call us to volunteer your time and talents. You may call during the hours our office is open, 11 am to 4 pm Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday at 248.338.6732. This will be an exciting year of events for our members as well as the community.

It is important to remember that our annual meeting is May 17, 2008, at which time new members of the board of directors will be elected. If you, or someone who know might be interested in running for office, please let us know. Do read the column on page 2 on the nomination procedure. We need new people and some younger people to carry on the preservation of historic communities such as Pine Grove Center.

Remember that you are a valued member of this society and we encourage you to participate in all events and to volunteer your services wherever and whenever you can.

Mike Willis, President

### BOARD OF DIRECTORS APPOINTEE

Michael West has been appointed to fill the vacancy on the Board of Directors left by the death of Rex Lamoreaux in October, 2007. Mike is new to our society during the past year, but has already taken the training classes for guides and is ready to go. His enthusiasm and new ideas prompted his appointment to the board. He will be eligible for election to the board for a three year term at the annual meeting in May.

### CALENDARS STILL AVAILABLE

The 2008 calendar published by this society is still available for sale. The historic photographs are in black and white and the cover is in full color. It is priced at \$20.00 per copy from our office. Each day has space for notes and appointment times. Pick up your copy before they are all gone.

The photograph of the Wisner House that is on the back of the Gazette was taken on a snowy January 19, 2008. Thanks to Keith Bennett for a great shot!

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## **UPCOMING EVENTS FOR 2008**

### **ANNUAL MEETING OF OCPHS – May 17, 2008**

All members are invited to attend to elect new board members and to get better acquainted with each other. A program follows the business meeting.

### **MICHIGAN'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM: THE CIVIL WAR ERA! – February 27 – May 4, 2008**

This comprehensive review of Michigan's activities during the Civil War period takes place at Macomb Community College's Lorenzo Cultural Center. It features artifacts from our collections and talks by OCPHS members Charles Martinez and Douglas Casamer. Over 40 different programs, exhibits and presentations are planned. Call 586.445.7348 or visit [www.macombculturalcenter.com](http://www.macombculturalcenter.com) for more information.

### **PONTIAC GARDEN CLUB – Saturday, July 19, 2008**

Annual tours of gardens in the Pontiac area - Pine Grove Center is headquarters for event.

### **ICE CREAM SOCIAL – Sunday, August 17, 2008**

We are returning with this popular event which will also include an appraisers' fair, antique car showing, tours of Wisner House, and on-going entertainment. Event sponsorships will be available.

### **ARTS, BEATS & EATS – August 29, 30, 31 & September 1, 2008**

We man a beverage booth and need a full staff of volunteers to raise funds for Pine Grove Center.

### **OAK HILL CEMETERY WALK – October 2008**

We are working with the Pontiac Garden Club to arrange a guided walking tour of this historic cemetery.

### **VICTORIAN CHRISTMAS – December 2008**

This popular winter event is also returning this year with expanded activities for all visitors.

### **LECTURE SERIES**

A series of small talks similar to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century Photography program presented in November 2008 by Judith Kalter and Fran Wilson. Subjects and speakers are being arranged. Suggestions from our readers will be considered.

## **IN MEMORIAM**

### **Gilbert George Haven died December 8, 2007**

Gil was born in Chesaning, Michigan 82 years ago. He served in World War II as a member of the 101<sup>st</sup> Cavalry. He was a teacher for over 30 years in the Frankenmuth, Clarkston and Lapeer School districts. He was a member of the Linden Masonic Lodge 132, V.F.W. 4642, Flint Genealogical Society, Genealogical Society of Vermont and Flint Institute of Art. He was an avid woodworker, historian, artist, sailor and genealogist. Gil was a member of this society's Board of Directors at the time of his death. We extend our condolences to his wife Faye, and children Neil, Gayle, and Keith.

### **LOSS OF OCPHS FRIENDS**

We have learned of the deaths of two friends of OCPHS. Richard Balmer and Eleanore McCurry. Mr. Balmer's late wife was Lillian Balmer, former OCPHS treasurer, and he was a life member and long-time supporter of the society. Mrs. McCurry and her daughter Gerry Howard, both of the Pontiac branch of Woman's National Farm and Garden Association, devoted many hours caring for our herb garden which is next to the summer kitchen at Pine Grove. We extend our sympathy to their families.

### **NOMINATIONS FOR BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

Those members of OCPHS who wish to be considered candidates for nomination to the Board of Directors for the term of office beginning in May 2008 should contact our office for an information packet as soon as possible. An applicant must be in good standing, which means dues must be paid to date.

The openings for directors are for a 3-year term of office. Board members are expected to be active and contributing members of the society, which includes: attending at least four of the 11 board meetings held each year; chair at least one committee and serve on other committees as needed; and, attend and assist at all events, where appropriate. Board members are encouraged to suggest ideas for events and procedures and to present such material in written form to the president of the society.

Directors govern the Society and oversee its resources. They are expected to fully participate in its operation and to be ambassadors for the organization. Directors are expected to be positive, enthusiastic and willing to work toward finding new members and

additional sources of revenue to expand and enhance our mission for both short-term and long-term goals.

Being a member of this board requires time, talent and dedication. It is an ideal position for the new era of "baby boomers" who are about to retire from the business world and want an outlet for their talents and resources. It is important to preserve and showcase our historic site and we welcome those who wish to work with us. Please call OCPHS office for an informational packet with more details, including a survey that must be returned to us no later than May 1, 2008.

### **THANK YOU! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!**

Again, we thank General Motors for their generosity in supporting our organization with their grants for upgrading and improving our public accommodations. Their \$5000.00 grant in December 2007 is allowing us to repair and refurbish the ramp leading to the carriage house. This grant will also allow us to establish walkways to the carriage house, from the driveway to the Wisner House and another to the schoolhouse. A smooth walkway will make it much easier for our visitors to get from one place to another. We are forever grateful to the GM committee for their assistance.

Thank you, too, to Home Depot for their contribution of \$650.00 to be used toward the up-dating of our kitchens in the carriage house and the Wisner House. We were able to obtain a small refrigerator, a microwave oven and new wiring in the carriage house kitchenette, and a self-defrosting refrigerator for the main house.

Thank you to the Pontiac Garden Club for their generous check of \$700 to be used for maintaining the rosebush hedge along Cesar Chavez Avenue. A watering system will be implemented to ensure healthy blooms.



Mary Posey

Pat Blackburn

Mike Willis

## **LIBRARY REPORT**

The research library staff has been hard at work identifying and sorting the photo collection. Under the direction of our intern, Julia Bauder, who has been with us since last spring, we have purchased a photo scanner and also a photo printer. Identified photos are being scanned into Past Perfect so we will be able in the future to locate specific photos and print them. The identification process is a lengthy and slow one, but once we have finished and stored the originals in archival sleeves, we will have a good idea of what is in the collection, and will be able to retrieve it.

Julia is responsible for the photographs which are on our 2008 calendar, which has received a very positive response. Julia graduated in December from Wayne State University with a masters degree in library science and is currently interviewing, looking for a position with a college/university library. We will miss her when she leaves.

Pat Fisher, who has been an active library volunteer, is once more with us, and we are glad to have her expertise. In addition, Joan Hayes, Guy Duffield and Cory Randall comprise the library staff. On Tuesdays we have the knowledge of Geoff Breiger, who works with Accessions, but lends us a helping hand when we need it. Without the help of Charlie Martinez, who mans the library when none of the rest of us can be present, we would be in real trouble.

Since the holidays we have had some trouble receiving our e-mails, but the problem has been identified and is being repaired. We should be able to answer e-mail queries soon.

Anyone researching automobiles should come to the library on Thursdays when Guy Duffield is on duty. He is an expert on historic autos.

*Fran Wilson, Librarian*

## **HISTORIC PONTIAC HOME OPEN FOR TOURS**

Ron Gay, a member of Oakland County Pioneer and Historical Society, purchased the Hoyt House at 146 W. Lawrence Street, within the Franklin Boulevard Historic District in Pontiac. In 2002 he petitioned the State Department of History to change the name of the house to the Sibley-Hoyt House and it is now registered on the National Register of Historic Places. This house was originally a cabin built about 1820 by Solomon and Sarah Sibley. Another house, circa 1840, was moved to the site, and attached to the cabin in 1867 by George Hoyt. Various additions and

changes were made over the years, the last being approximately 100 years ago. Mr. Gay was adding a new roof in 2007 when he found that the original shingles of the 1840 house were still in place. Music and dance were taught in this building from 1863 to 1964. Many of Pontiac's children took dance lessons here from Miss Georgia Hoyt. Mr. Gay will be offering tours of this historic home on the last Sundays of each month, starting in February. You may call him for further information at 248-334-2632.

**BOARD OF DIRECTOR PROFILE**

**RODGER ZELLER**

Rodger was born in Battle Creek, Michigan, son of Charles and Harriet. The family owned a bakery business started by Charles' father. His two brothers and a sister worked in the bakery while young. Rodger attended Battle Creek High School, Malone College in Canton, Ohio, finishing with a BA degree in History. He graduated from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California with a Bachelor of Divinity Degree. He was a minister of Christian Education for one year; then spent 30 years as a teacher in the Pontiac school system. He teaches Sunday school and sings in the church choir. He is an avid golfer and devoted fan of Detroit area sports teams: Tigers, Red Wings, Pistons, Lions, and all University of Michigan teams. He also enjoys visiting historical sites, which led to his involvement with the Pontiac Historic District Study Committee for the Franklin Street District, where he served on a committee with Rex Lamoreaux and Jean Milton. He learned about this society from his Historic Commission work, and when he retired from teaching, he became a guide at OCPHS. He has been involved ever since. He has been on the Board of Directors for seven years, and helped with several fund raising events. He belongs to Bethany Baptist Church, Michigan Association of Retired School Personnel, Michigan Historical Society, and National Trust for Historic Preservation. He married his wife Beverly in 1975 and they have two children: Jeff Schaffner is in graduate school in the Boston area and will graduate this year with a Masters in Archives; daughter Laurie had been a music teacher for five years and is now working for Schwan's food delivery company. He is a mainstay of our guiding team, and we are delighted to have him involved with our society.

**MEMBERSHIP UPDATE**

As a reminder, all memberships will be up for renewal on July 1, 2008. Those whose memberships expire in January, February or March have been sent renewal notices with a reduced fee structure. Those whose

memberships expire in April, May, or June, will not have to renew until July 1, at which time everyone will receive a renewal notice. For those who would like to join our society before July 1, the following fees will entitle you to vote at the annual meeting for officers and receive the next two issues of *The Gazette*.

Student:	\$ 7.50
Individual:	\$10.00
Family (2 adults, children under 18)	\$17.50
Non-Profit Organization	\$10.00
Patron	\$50.00
Benefactor	\$100.00
Friend of OCPHS	\$250.00
Corporate Sponsor	\$250.00

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**ADULT TOURS OF PINE GROVE CENTER**

Now is the time to book a springtime tour of our grounds and facilities. Gather a group of friends or plan this outing as a scheduled event for your club, church fellowship group, historical society, genealogical organization, DAR meeting, or any group of 6 or more. The schoolhouse is available for lunch if you bring your own. Call our office for reservations. 248.338.6732

## MEMORIES OF PLACE: DONELSON SCHOOL

by *Bruce Annett, Jr.*

OK, so I loved her. Her beauty. The memories. And oh, those two big globes!

I write, of course, of Donelson School on West Huron St. in Waterford, torn down in Oct. 2006 at the age of 78.



Donelson was my alma mater for kindergarten through sixth grade. From 1957 to 1966, some great teachers labored valiantly, if not always successfully, to transform my little mind of mush into that of a thinking, cogent being.

Iva (Bensett) O'Dell was the principal. A great-great-great-granddaughter of Pontiac's founder Stephen Mack, she'd led the school since 1929, the year after it opened, and served 37 years before retiring in 1967. She was a kind but formidable leader with high expectations. Her rules for walking the halls were to be quiet and stay as far to the right as possible. Donelson's terrazzo floors and glazed brick halls were polished by generations of students gliding silently against the walls.

O'Dell was not the only long-timer. My first grade teacher, Lois Rockefeller, and several others still serving in the 1960s had been there since Donelson's opening day.

The custodian, Mr. White, was a dapper, white-haired gentleman adept at fixing everything from jammed jacket zippers to broken eyeglass stems. His basement office was a repository of ancient tools and smelled of machine oil and sweeping compound. Awaiting your repair, you could gaze at the spider web of steam pipes that disappeared into the shadows or at the orange-hot maw of the enormous coal-fired boiler which hissed, gurgled, and thumped as if alive.

During special assemblies we enjoyed visits by authors, police dogs and their handlers, and a General Motors' *Preview of Progress* demonstration, presented from the stage in the gymnasium with us all seated on the gym's oak floor. Although confirmation is lacking, I swear that Robert Frost dropped by to recite some poetry, too, during his 1962 visit to Ann Arbor.

Donelson's stage featured footlights that ingeniously folded out of trap doors -- when performing we had to take care not to slip into the troughs and get burned.

The annual Christmas Pageant and Michigan Week Shows were two events in which students starred. In fifth grade, I narrated our extravaganza, "The Christmas Mouse," that featured songs and dialogue by every student in every grade. Tragically, after one night's performance, classmate Rogelio's little sister was struck by a car and killed as he and his family walked home in the dark. We all paid more attention to warnings about traffic after that.

Donelson's gym also hosted, several times a year, marvelous scholastic book fairs and, every Tuesday at 7 p.m., the meetings of our Boy Scout troop. Several of our scout leaders were World War II veterans who taught us, among outdoor and life skills, the intricacies of close order drills.

The catalyst for building Donelson School had been rapid growth in the southeastern corner of Waterford Township, notably the new Huron Gardens, Sylvan Shores, and Donelson Park subdivisions. Pontiac's

burgeoning auto plants had an insatiable need for new workers and the city's population had doubled in eight years. Development ballooned outward from the city as new housing struggled to keep pace.

In remarks presented at the Sept. 22, 1927 cornerstone laying, Mark Donelson, then president of Waterford's Fractional District Number One, noted that in 1909 and 1910, there were only three pupils in the district. Two of those were his children, Gilbert and Faye. By the time construction of the school began, the census had jumped to 487 children. (Faye later served OCPHS as president and was a long-time dedicated volunteer.) "The residents of Oakland County are very lucky to be living in such a wonderful place with so many natural advantages and so close to Detroit," Mark Donelson said.

The land where the school was being built had been part of his family farm, purchased by his settler grandfather, Ira, in 1822. It had not been cleared of trees until 1880. The community paid \$11,500 for the land and \$145,985.91 to build, equip, and landscape the building.

Donelson recalled in his remarks that his grandfather in horse and buggy had once beaten the first train from Detroit, traversing the 26 miles in three and a half hours. "Today it only takes from 40 to 50 minutes by auto over the greatest highway in the world," he marveled. (Woodward Ave. was being expanded to become the region's first paved, divided-lane "superhighway.") "I have seen some wonderful changes in this country and our children will see greater as the airplane is just coming," Donelson predicted. He closed by saying he was glad to have been able "to give some time and money to this building" and was honored that the school was being named for his family. Donelson's five pages of hand written remarks and a copy of the previous day's *Pontiac Daily Press* were then sealed in a copper box and placed in the cornerstone.



Architects and engineers for the new school were Lane, Davenport & Peterson of Detroit. The partners appear to have specialized in academic buildings and a decade later designed several buildings for the University of Michigan. They adorned Donelson School's two stories with buff brick trimmed with limestone patterned in a restrained Art Deco style. The main entrance was surmounted by brick piers, ornamented by vertical and horizontal strips of stone in stepped patterns. The piers were topped by those stone globes that I fancied represented either lamps of knowledge or the worlds we students were destined to conquer.

Some 600 people attended the school's opening ceremonies Feb. 11, 1928. The Huron Gardens Civic Club led by Mrs. A.H. Crowell transformed itself into the first PTA, and donated dishes and silverware service for 125 as well as \$100.99 for playground equipment. The Donelsons themselves donated a U.S. flag. Pontiac Women's Club presented 50 books to start the library.

The school opened with 12 classrooms, generously fitted out with oak cabinetry, doors, and casework, including an encased fireplace in the kindergarten room. An oak tall-case pendulum clock ticked away in the office and kept master time via wire to clocks throughout the building. The architects urged the school board to be certain to keep windows open in the new building throughout that first summer to aid the drying of the woodwork and plaster. Donelson initially housed kindergarten through grade eight. Before then, several smaller schools served the vicinity and many students paid tuition to attend school in Pontiac. It wasn't until 1942 that Waterford's fractional districts consolidated and after World War II established a junior/senior high school.



Additions in 1950 and the late 1960s nearly doubled Donelson's size and precisely mimicked the original building's exterior details. Donelson's last classes departed for its more modern successor, renamed Donelson Hills in 1995, but the old building had a stay of execution, serving for eight years as offices for several Oakland Intermediate District programs. The property had been for sale for several years when it was decided the site may be easier to sell without the building than with it.

Sick at heart when razing began in October 2006, I sought out the demolition superintendent, S.A. (Angelo) Torello. Torello is a guy you'd want on your side in a fight, and he had the contract to knock the building down, salvage what he wished, and cart what remained to landfill. He's very good at what he does, and from his company's base in Port Huron has demolished buildings as far away as Florida.

Day by day, Donelson's familiar façade disappeared as resulting mounds of rubble grew. As deftly as using his fingers to pick up toothpicks, Torello guided the grappling jaws of his huge Caterpillar excavator to lift, pull, or push the school apart, and then separate the liberated iron, steel, and other metals for recycling. He'd occasionally grab an errant girder in the grappler to clear debris from his path, sweeping it like the palm of his hand might whisk crumbs off a tablecloth. One of his crew said he'd given the massive machine to himself as a gift for his 73rd birthday.

Torello said it is not worthwhile economically for him to salvage architectural components. No one else had expressed any interest so after several days of pleading and being a pest, I managed to convince him of my desire to save the stone globes. I also pointed out the cornerstone and told him of the Society's interest in its contents. He said he'd try but more walls had to come down first, and to return the following Monday. *On the appointed day* and after scrambling to buy some hefty nylon lifting straps, I arrived to find the entrance wall pulverized above the first floor. Worst of all was seeing one globe lying shattered where it had dropped to the sidewalk. But then Torello, his machine, and several of his men obligingly poked about and pulled the second globe relatively unscathed from the rubble and lifted it into my rented pick-up. Weighing some 400 pounds, the globe is the perfect garden ornament -- although it "grew" a lot bigger viewed on the ground than it had appeared high above the entrance. Torello next used his grappler to knock free the cornerstone. He and his crew and I excitedly looked inside its copper box, partially crushed by moving the stone, and found the newspaper and Mark Donelson's speech that had been sealed within it since 1927 -- not gold but a treasure nonetheless! My truck groaned audibly when Torello then unexpectedly hefted the 600-pound cornerstone itself aboard and smilingly waved me off. He refused the fee he'd agreed to and asked me to instead give it to one of his young workers who had been particularly helpful.

Winston Churchill observed that, "We shape our buildings; thereafter, they shape us." I'm saddened that we've lost yet another touchstone to the past, a building that shaped so many. Fortunately, with perseverance, luck, and a cooperative contractor, I managed to rescue some remnants that are fond reminders of a wonderful building and the dedicated individuals who influenced my youth.

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*Materials for this article were drawn from the collections of the author, the Oakland County Pioneer and Historical Society, and with kind assistance from Sally Strait of the Waterford Historical Society, and Rhonda Lessel of the Waterford School District.*

**OAKLAND COUNTY PIONEER &  
HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

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**MEMBERSHIPS ARE FOR ONE YEAR, FROM JULY 1  
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Check desired membership category and enclose with this application and check or money order made payable to Oakland County Pioneer & Historical Society and mail to above address.

