

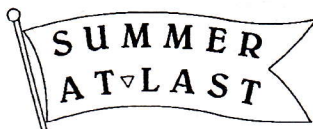
History Explorer

A publication of the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

August 2009

INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

John Robson, Mayor	1
Craftsman Style - The Movie	2
Mt. Hope Cemetery Tour	3
Forest Parke Library Hours	3
Gift Depot	5
Membership Application	5
August '09 Program	6



Historical Society of Greater Lansing

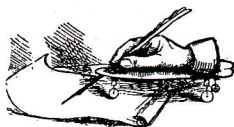
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Craig A. Whitford, Editor

History Explorer is published during the months of September to May by the HSGL. Articles and news of historical interest are always welcome.

"Do you Remember" and "Home-Coming" Interviews

John Robson, Mayor of Lansing in 1871 & 1881

Lansing Journal - August 6, 1913

Three important events happened during the administration of John Robson as mayor of the city back in 1871 which will always remain in the minds of those who lived here then and helped turn the wheels of the city government machine. Robson is the oldest living mayor in point of service but he will never be too old to talk of early times and the difficulties which confronted the city government officials in the matter of obtaining improvements.

The three milestones which marked Robson's service were the obtaining of the first iron bridge for the city, the installation of the gas company and the purchase of the first two fire engines.

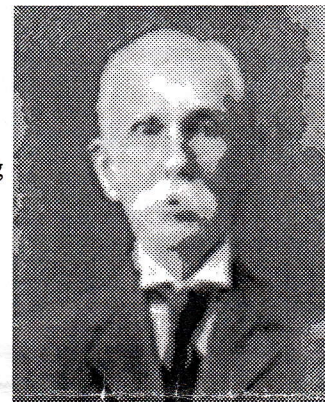
"I have to laugh now when I think of the troubles we had," said Mr. Robson yesterday, shaking his head, "but in those days these difficulties were real hard struggles. The country was new comparatively then. There were no pavements. The city government was run in a sort of a haphazard method and there wasn't the system to everything which now prevails. Then, too, the people were slow to accept improvements. They were typical frontier people and had to be shown before they would go headlong into debt for city additions.

"I hope I meet some of the men at the home-coming who were so bitterly opposed to some of the measures that came up for consideration during my term of office. There were wordy battles and some fist-flying, too. I'd like to have a reunion of the old city council this fall. We could have some great laughs now over what then seemed to be grounds for free-for-all fights.

"When I was first elected mayor in 1871—they only had one-year terms then—the campaign and the operations of the council after the campaign were pretty strenuous. The first tussle we had arose over the matter of a new bridge across the river at Michigan ave. The structure at that time was an old wooden latticed bridge. It had been in use for a long period and had become rotted and unfit for travel. In fact it was a dangerous proposition. The timbers creaked and give every evidence of weakness even when a dog trotted across and as for heavy traffic, it was perilous.

"The council was divided. A number of the councilmen were strong in their belief that the old bridge needed a few repairs which would make it last another decade while the other faction of the council was for building a new bridge. We finally advertised for bids for a new bridge just to see how much expense would be entailed. Then came a suggestion that the city purchase an iron bridge. Iron bridges were a novelty in those days, especially in Lansing. We had never seen one and thought that it would be far too expensive for the city. An agent for an iron bridge company swooped down upon the council and the first thing we knew we were advertising for bids for both iron and wooden bridges.

"The bids came in. The iron bridge people offered to construct a fine new one-span bridge for \$10,000. The men of the council who had advocated repairs declared the old bridge



John Robson

Continued on Page 4

Join Us...

Thursday, August 13, 2009 - 7:00 PM: *The Mayors of Lansing*. A soldier of fortune, a Methodist minister, an opponent of Abraham Lincoln, a circus owner, a heavyweight boxing champ... What do they have in common? All were former mayors of Lansing. Presentation by David Votta, Local History Librarian, Capital Area District Library. Please join us in the Friend's Auditorium of the CADL Main Library, 401 S. Capitol, Lansing.

Craftsman Style

The Movie

Craftsman Style tells the story of Dave Muylle, a veteran contractor turned citizen-filmmaker, and his two-year journey to restore a former drug house into a new home for his family. Best described as “This Old House” for regular people, this documentary provides a detailed account of the rebuilding work done by Dave and his fellow craftsmen. The film also explores how this type of renovation provides a new model for home construction in urban America, one in which wonderful old houses are not simply torn down and replaced but are restored to their former glory, a practice that saves valuable natural resources while also honoring the past. While not intended as an indictment of urban sprawl, the film does offer this important insight: “Craftsmanship, restoration, and community—this is true sustainability.”

THE MAKING of CRAFTSMAN STYLE

By Dave Muylle, Producer

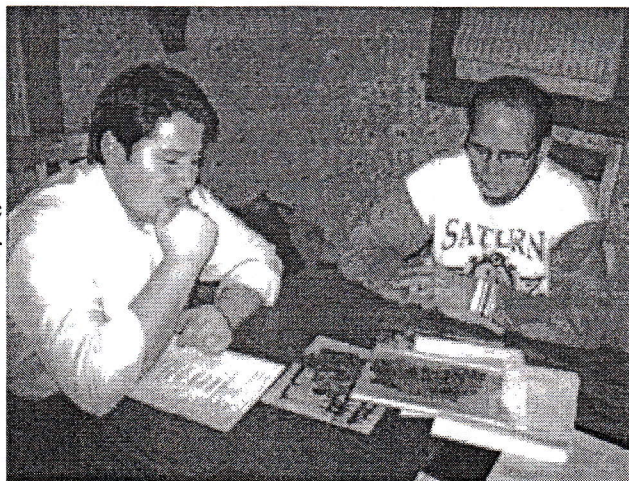
In 1999 I was working on a building directly across the street from the house featured in *Craftsman Style*. Looking across the street, I saw all the signs of a drug house (many different people making brief visits was the best clue). With the help of the Lansing

Police the house was shut down and deemed uninhabitable due to its terrible condition. Since I had a financial interest in the neighborhood I thought the best thing to do was to buy the house myself, so I contacted the owner and made a deal on it.

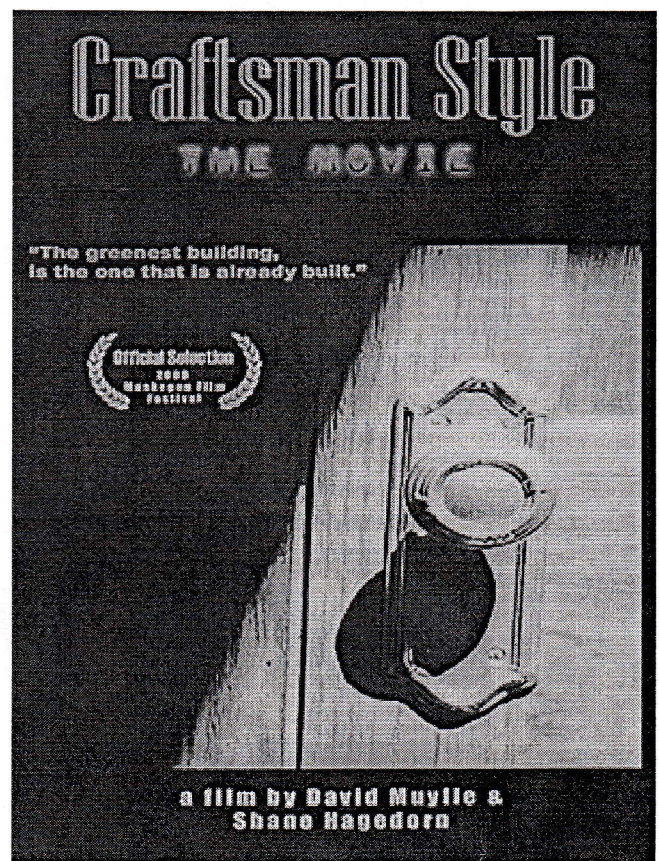
In 2003 I finally got started on the restoration of the house at, 124 Regent Street in Lansing, Michigan.

About this time a nice young couple, Shane and Stacy

Hagadorn, moved in next door. Besides having a real job as a security officer for Sparrow Hospital, Shane is also an independent filmmaker. The more we



Shane Hagadorn and David Muylle



talked the more excited we got about making a documentary film about the work I was doing on 124 Regent Street.

We decided to portray the restoration of the house in close detail, including the work done by a number of skilled local craftsmen. We also set out to explore the theme of sustainability, an idea that I break into three components:

Craftsmanship.

Using the best quality materials installed in the best way possible creates a level of quality that is easy to maintain and will outlast the cheap stuff. Craftsmanship also includes careful design and thinking about how material selections impact the environment.

Restoration.

When it comes to our homes, fashion and style often dictate that we throw out the old and install the new. When this happens the original energy it took to build the old part, a window for instance, is tossed in the


Craftsman Style, continued from Page 2

dump. The energy it took to cut down the tree, transport it to the mill, run the saw, and then transport the window to the site is known as embedded energy. Restoration saves this embedded energy by refurbishing and reusing the original parts.

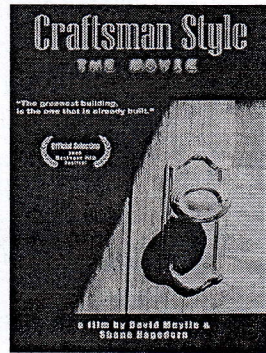
Community. When we think of sustainability we typically think of buildings, land, solar panels, and so on. Sustainability also relies on the interest and energy of people who together value buildings and places enough to properly care for them so future generations can use them.

As a longtime contractor and first-time filmmaker, it was interesting to compare the work of making this film to the

actual work involved in the restoration of the house. They are alike in many ways. Both are a step-by-step process. Each has the ultimate aim of producing a product that people will enjoy and perhaps buy. Color,

proportion, rhythm, and flow are concepts important to both efforts. Planning is important. Scheduling people to show up at a certain place with the right tools at a certain time to do a certain thing is critical to both activities. Both are creative efforts. In the end neither a restored house nor a film are perfect. Many hours were spent on both of these projects, trying to get everything just right. Finally, in both endeavors we eventually had to say, "That's our best, we're done." 

Mark your Calendar for the Premier



The showing is part of a fundraising event for the Allen Neighborhood Center (ANC). Suggested donation of \$10-\$25 at the door, Hope to see you there!

Craftsman Style The Movie

The Lansing premier will be shown on
**Friday,
September 18,
2009
7:00 P.M.**

Dart Auditorium
on the campus of
Lansing Community
College



Mt. Hope Cemetery WALKING TOUR

Join us for a walking tour of Lansing's beautiful and historic Mount Hope Cemetery. Hear stories of local families, shopkeepers, soldiers, statesmen...and one naked lady!

Several families included in the tour will be profiled in an upcoming book by the Mid-Michigan Genealogical Society. The society is sponsoring the tour in conjunction with the Historical Society of Greater Lansing and the Lansing Area African American Genealogy Society.

**Sunday,
August 30, 2 P.M.**

1709 E. Mount Hope Ave., Lansing
Meet at the entrance

For more information contact:
Jesse Lasorda at 517.455.1976

Forest Parke Library & Archives

*Research local history at the
Downtown Lansing Library!*

The Forest Parke Library & Archives, (formerly the local history room) is OPEN to the Public the first and third Saturday of the month from 10 AM to 2 PM.

Volunteers from the *Historical Society of Greater Lansing* will be available to assist patrons.

Local History holdings do not circulate, only inventoried materials are available and special rules and regulations will apply.

**1st & 3rd Saturday's
10:00 AM to 2:00 P.M.**

**Capital Area District Library
401 S. Capitol, Lansing**

David Votta, Local History Reference Librarian
517.334.1521; Email: dvotta@cadl.org

John Robson, continued from Page 1

could be made as good as new for an expenditure of only \$2,000. The public looked long at that extra \$8,000 and many were won over to their side. The iron bridge company had never built a one-span bridge to cross the river at that point but said the trick could be turned. The \$10,000 bid of the iron bridge company was but little in excess of the bids for wooden bridges and as nobody in the town new anything about iron bridges, and blamed little of any bridges, they were dubious as to whether to accept or reject the iron bridge bid. We had no city engineer to tell us anything, the council was divided about evenly. We were up a stump.

"Finally a plan was hit upon. A committee was appointed to visit other towns where this particular bridge company was building bridges and get the consensus of opinion as to the efficiency of the bridge. One of the councilmen took sick the day they were to leave, I remember, and I couldn't find another citizen in the town would volunteer the trip. So I went myself. We spent three days in inspecting several bridges and returned to the next council gathering with a favorable report on the iron bridge.

"A hot fight ensued on the floor of the city council rooms. I remember one of the former mayors came in and called me a fool and a spendthrift and said I was wasting \$8,000 of the city's good money. Just to convince myself that I wasn't a fool I went down to the old bridge myself. I knew no more of bridge building than anyone else in the city but I can tell when a bridge is unsafe. I stuck a penknife clear through one of the timbers supporting the planks—it was that rotten. Right then and there I decided we would take the iron bridge. The result was the iron bridge appropriation was voted through despite the storm of protest emitted by the opposition. I told the bridge builders on my own responsibility to raise the bridge four feet higher than the old one.

"My reward came when the old bridge was torn down. The people all flocked down there to see the razing and when they observed how rotten and dangerous a structure they had been walking over for the past few years they patted me on the back and said we had the right hunch.

"Recently the question came up before the present council as to the advisability of allowing two tracks to cross the present bridge at Michigan ave. Some claimed the weight of the traffic would be too much for its strength. We had the same kind of a problem to solve on the old bridge only on a smaller scale. The people then declared that the one-span iron bridge would never stand up under the heavy loads of stone which were being hauled across for the purpose of building. So heated was the discussion—in those days everyone participated in the debates when things weren't run to their liking—that I was forced to send for the bridge builders again and consult with them. They told us the bridge would hold all the traffic you could pile on her and the truth of this statement will be seen when people stop to consider that the old one-span iron bridge is now doing service over the river at Kalamazoo at and holding up under far greater strains than those with which it was taxed when it was built."

"If any of the boys come back to the home-coming I'm going to take them down to the foot of Kalamazoo at and show them the bridge they said was no good. "So much for bridges.

The next 'free-for-all' was the gas question. Lansing wanted gas and wanted it bad but the people didn't know anything about gas and they were wary. They didn't want to be buncoed. A representative of a gas company from Ann Arbor came here with the tooting of horns and proclaimed to the innocent citizens that

he had the greatest gas that was ever gassed. It was a new fangled idea in gas, claimed to be made from crude oil. Many were the alleged virtues of this gas. It shone brighter and cost less than any gas on the market.

"I went slow on the proposition as I didn't want to get in bad with the community. I had never heard of the gas. Finally I asked the agent if there was any other city using the article. He spoke of some little obscure town in Pennsylvania as the proud possessor of the unique system. The town was so far away that nobody from Lansing was likely to ever reach it. But I was running a store at the time and had to go to New York occasionally for goods. On my next trip east I stopped off at the aforesaid town. The result was convincing. All the things they said about that gas company would fill a book and the book would be

condemned to burn at the stake for the unprintable epithets. And the whole town vowed if they ever caught the agent who put over the deal he would never see home again. We toured the little town. The light from the jets looked like little yellow lightning bugs and the street lights were worse than nothing. We decided as soon as I exposed the system that we didn't want crude oil gas. So the Lansing Gad company was ushered into the city.

"Then came the fight about the fire engines. I'll never forget that as long as I live. We had no paved streets and the only means of fire protection was volunteer department whose equipment consisted of a man-power engine with handbrakes. It's a relic now. Someone brought it up at and presented it to the city not long ago. The question of purchasing a steam engine came up. The dissension was as great in this case as in the bridge and gas problems. The opposition said the streets would never hold heavy engines and they were right, too, for in the wet seasons heavy wagons used to sing up to the hubs and travel was almost impossible.

"Outside fire engine concerns saw our plight. There was an agent from the Silsbury Rotary Fire Engine company who wanted to sell us a \$6,000 engine. Then an agent for the Clapp & Jones company offered us an engine for \$4,500. The city had no cash on hand and of course there were a great many who wanted the cheaper engine. The Silsbury agent got busy and showed us a petition with a great list of names of citizens favoring his engine while the Clapp & Jones agent got the approval of the members of the volunteer fire department to back his engine up. It was a great fight with no money in the city jeans to pay for either engine.

"At last we decided to set a date for a trial of the engines to determine their respective merits. The Silsbury people at first balked on this suggestion but finally agreed to a trial and after many difficulties and postponements secret tests were given the fire engines. They didn't know what was coming off and although the Clapp & Jones man was tricky in heating the water in his engine the night before when the test was to start with cold



The Michigan Avenue Bridge, c. late 1870s

John Robson, continued from Page 4

water, his perfidy was discovered and he was made to draw the water from the river. The Silsbury engine was clearly superior to the other one but the Clapp & Jones agent was much cleverer. The next day he got out his engine and gave a public demonstration in the streets before a great crowd of townspeople. He gained popular applause to so great extent that I was besieged with entreaties and later threats not to buy the Silsbury engine but take the Clapp & Jones engine. A petition was circulated and received many signers to the effect that the people of Lansing thought I was spending too much of their money foolishly.

"I was between two fires and it was getting too hot for comfort. Then something happened that changed the situation and brought peace in the city family. For a long time the citizens of North Lansing, who were vying with Lansing proper in the matter of improvements, had been crying for a fire engine. And now that the city was to have a new engine there was a great clamor from the north side. Inasmuch as we would

have to get an engine for them later on and as the Clapp & Jones people had offered their engine for \$3,500 a \$1,000 cut from their original price. I decided it would be a good plan to purchase both engines. This plan was taken up after some discussion and in that way the storm from the north side was abated and the persons who wanted to buy the Klapp & Jones engine in the first place were satisfied.

"We had great times then. They wanted me to run on the republican ticket for mayor the following year but I was tired of the spats and dissensions and then too, I was not sure I could be reelected. I ran again 10 years later in 1881 and served another term. Conditions had settled considerably by that time and my administration was void of the strife and turmoil which marked the earlier days."

Mr. Robson is counting the days until the date of the home-coming arrives and is anxious to hob-nob with old-time friends and enemies. He is one of thousands who expects to thoroughly enjoy the reunion. **RE**

The Gift Depot

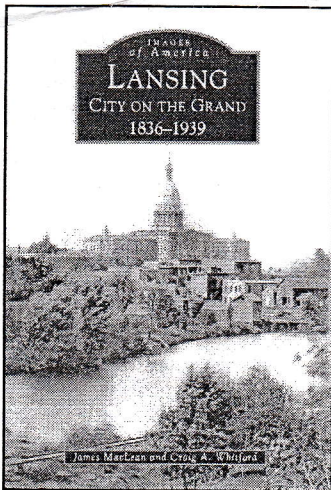
1 Give the Gift of History with a membership in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Individual Memberships: \$15/year

Family Memberships: \$25/year

2 Lansing: City On The Grand, 1836-1939

By James MacLean & Craig A. Whitford



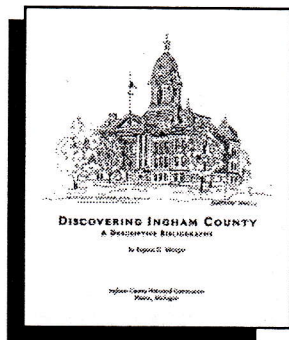
Lansing's history as the capital of Michigan began with a legislative mandate in the 1835 State Constitution, which required that the seat of government be moved from Detroit in 1847. The result – the emergence of a new capital city on the banks of the majestic Grand River – allowed Lansing to cultivate a world-class community based in government, education, the automotive industry and entrepreneurial achievements. This book features more than 200 historic photographs that document the dynamic capital city during its pivotal first century, from the pioneer era to the inception of the Olds Motor Vehicle Company and through the eve of World War II.

\$19.99

Published by Arcadia,
An Imprint of Tempus Publishing, Inc.

3 Discovering Ingham County
A Descriptive Bibliography

By Eugene G. Wanger



This 100+ page edition is a sequel to Mr. Wanger's *INGHAM COUNTY HISTORIES: An Annotated Bibliography for Students, Buffs and Collectors...* "an interesting and useful guide for discovering the history and historical resources of Ingham County, The Capital County of Michigan..." Published by the Ingham County Historical Commission.

\$15.00

Published by the
Ingham County Historical Commission

Check out the
Historical Society of Greater Lansing
on the web at

www.lansinghistory.org

Give a Friend a Gift Membership in the
Historical Society of Greater Lansing

Membership Application

Please accept my New Renewal membership in the *Historical Society of Greater Lansing*. I have enclosed:

\$15 Individual \$25 Family
 \$150 Life or \$ _____ Gift

Name: _____

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City: _____

State: _____ Zip: _____

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*Historical Society
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Historical Society of Greater Lansing

The Mayors of Lansing



A soldier of fortune, a Methodist minister, an opponent of Abraham Lincoln, a circus owner, and a heavyweight boxing champ...

What do they have in common?

All were former mayors of Lansing, Michigan

Join us for this fascinating look at our city's history with David Votta, Local History Librarian, Capital Area District Library

Thursday, August 13, 2009

7:00 P.M.

Friend's Auditorium

Lower Level, Capital Area District Library - Main Library
401 S. Capitol, Lansing, Michigan

Celebrate
Lansing's 150th
with History!
1859-2009

Please RSVP to:

Change Service Requested

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