

# History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

[www.LansingHistory.org](http://www.LansingHistory.org)

November 2011

## J.W. Sexton High School Tour Scheduled

Some of you will remember that in the fall of 2010 the Historical Society had the opportunity to visit Lansing's historic Eastern High School. Due to the positive response from our members regarding the event, we've arranged to visit J.W. Sexton High School for a similar tour on Tuesday evening, November 15, 2011. The doors will open at 6:30 pm. The program will begin at 7 pm in the auditorium, and will be followed by tours of the building. We hope you can attend. The evening will close with refreshments in the social room. HSGL would like to thank Sexton Principal Dr. Reginald T. Bates, Assistant Principal Mr. Steven Lonzo, and the Sexton National Honor Society for their hospitality.

Sexton High School was first conceived of in the 1930s, when the west side of Lansing was growing rapidly. At that time student populations in Lansing were quickly expanding. Designs for the new school building were begun in 1939, with the Warren S. Holmes Co., the architects of the building, taking over a year to research the educational needs the new school building would have to meet. One anecdote relates how a biology and taxidermy teacher who would be teaching at Sexton requested a conservatory large enough to maintain an entire ecosystem, so he could better teach his pupils!

Work began on the school in 1941, just before America entered World War II. After some discussion with the government about the usage of valuable construction supplies, it was decided that work would continue during the war years. The school was opened officially opened for classes in 1943, despite the fact that some portions of the building were not yet complete due to lack of funding. The auditorium exterior was finished in 1943, but the interior was not complete until 1949. In 1956 the school's natatorium was completed, bringing about the official end of the school's construction. Despite a great many cost cutting measures, including the elimination of interesting architectural elements, the final price tag for the school was over \$2 million.

## HSGL Gift Memberships Available

If you find yourself struggling this December to find the perfect gift for your favorite history buff, don't forget that HSGL does offer gift memberships! To purchase a membership as a gift, fill out the membership form found on the back of this newsletter with the appropriate contact information for the person *receiving* the membership. Then send the form, along with a check, to our P.O. Box. The person receiving the membership will begin receiving the newsletter, either by post or e-mail, the following month. All memberships are good for 12 months.

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## Membership Renewals

Don't forget to check your address label for notification as to when your membership will be up for renewal. If you have any questions about memberships, please feel free to contact the society at any time at [info@lansinghistory.org](mailto:info@lansinghistory.org).

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## See You Again In January

Just to remind everyone, the Historical Society of Greater Lansing does not meet in December, nor do we publish an issue of *The History Explorer*. We look forward to seeing all of our members again in January, when the new year comes. In the meantime, Happy Thanksgiving, Happy Hanukkah, Merry Christmas, and Happy Kwanza!

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## Silent Auction Raises Several Thousand Dollars for Historical Museum!

The Historical Society of Greater Lansing would like to say a huge thank you to all of you who attended our first annual silent auction on October 8<sup>th</sup>. About 100 people attended the event, and about \$9,000 was raised. Thank you very much to all of you who bought tickets, donated items, served as sponsors, provided food, and bid on items. We couldn't have done it without you!

## Lansing Pockets - Another Claim to Fame

By Le Roy Barnett, PhD

If someone tries to envision a “nerd,” with all due respect they will probably not conjure-up the likeness of our current governor who claims to be one. Instead, they are apt to see the image of a young male attired in pants belted high on the waist, wearing black shoes and black-framed glasses, white socks, and a short-sleeved, white shirt with a pocket protector full of implements.

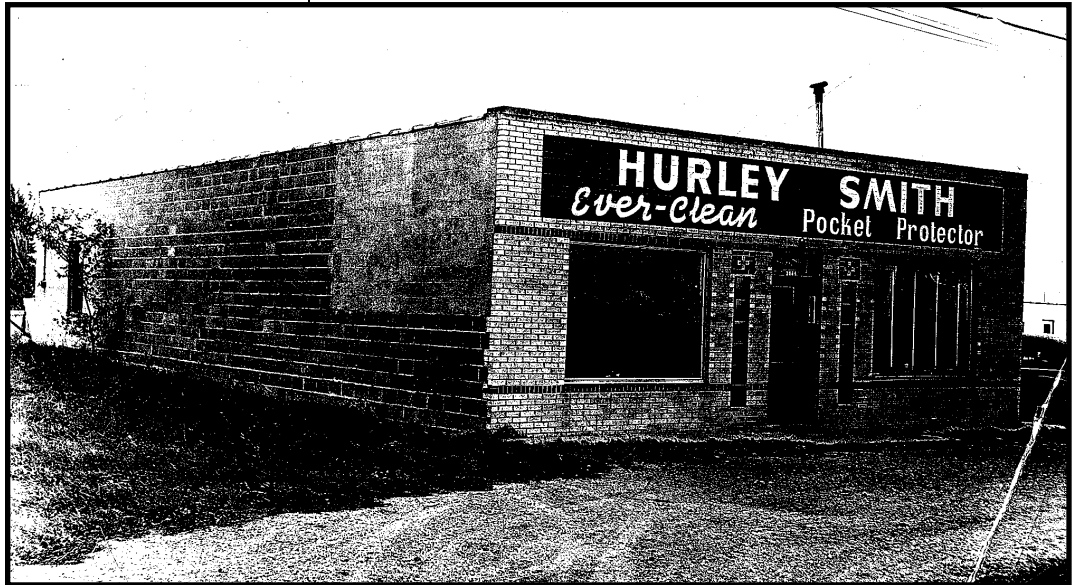
This word-picture almost describes the uniform for the stereotypical nerd, particularly the plastic pouch that not only protects the breast pocket from leaky pens and smudgy pencils but also prevents the fabric from fraying as writing instruments are frequently pulled from, and returned to, the shirt’s built-in storage compartment.

This nerd fashion accessory is singled out for attention here because it was invented by a Lansing resident and actually manufactured for a time in the Capitol City. The story begins on 27 May 1908, when Hurley Joseph Smith was born in Bellaire, Antrim County, Michigan. After growing up in the Grand Traverse region, Hurley moved to Kingston, Ontario where he graduated from Queen’s University in 1933 with a Bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering.

Smith’s first job after graduation was marketing Popsicles to Canadian retailers. Business was so poor during the depths of the Great Depression that he reportedly relied upon the product he was selling for much of his sustenance in those hard economic times.

Eventually, Hurley found employment in his field of training when he acquired a position with a Buffalo, New York business that dealt with electrical transformers. Illegally, this enterprise was rebuilding used transformers and selling them as new. When this matter was discovered by authorities, the company was brought to trial for its misdeeds. Smith testified honestly in court about the firm’s transgressions, and this candor under oath cost him his job.

Out-of-work, Hurley cast about for some way to make a living. As an engineer, he realized that neat appearance was necessary on the job where employees were expected to be in business attire. This was often difficult when soiled fingers had to periodically reach for small things stored in the pocket of a white dress shirt.



*The only known photo still in existence of Smith’s Lansing shop.*

To solve this problem, Smith experimented at home making sheaths out of Cellophane or Celluloid that could serve as pocket shields. Legend has it that he used his wife’s iron to heat his raw materials so as to make them easier to bend and seal as he conducted his tests in an attic workshop.

Eventually, Hurley came up with a prototype pocket guard that met his requirements, and he received a patent for this device in 1947.<sup>1</sup> The inventor began manufacturing these gadgets at his home, but it was soon clear that larger quarters would be needed to meet demand. Smith’s quest for more commercial space led him to Lansing in 1949, where he set up shop at 414 North Cedar employing several people to make the “Ever-Clean” brand of pocket protectors.

### Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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www.LansingHistory.org

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Smith continued to refine his product. Before long he developed a method of printing logos or messages on the front flap of his pocket protectors. This expanded the market beyond engineers, math students and white-collar workers to include businesses that wanted to buy and distribute the items for advertising or promotional purposes.

Also evolving was the raw material for the pocket guards. Over time they went from being made out of cellulose acetate to a more superior polyvinyl chloride. As the quality and popularity of Hurley's invention improved, other companies started manufacturing the pouches without paying royalties to Smith. For whatever reason, he chose not to contest these actions in court and remained content just to fill whatever orders he received at his pioneer facility in Lansing.

It is unclear if Hurley eventually went out of business or sold his operation to some other person. At any rate, by 1959 the city directories list Smith as being employed by the City Board of Water & Light as an assistant engineer. His career with the utility lasted a little more than a decade, as by 1971 the local directories show him as being retired.

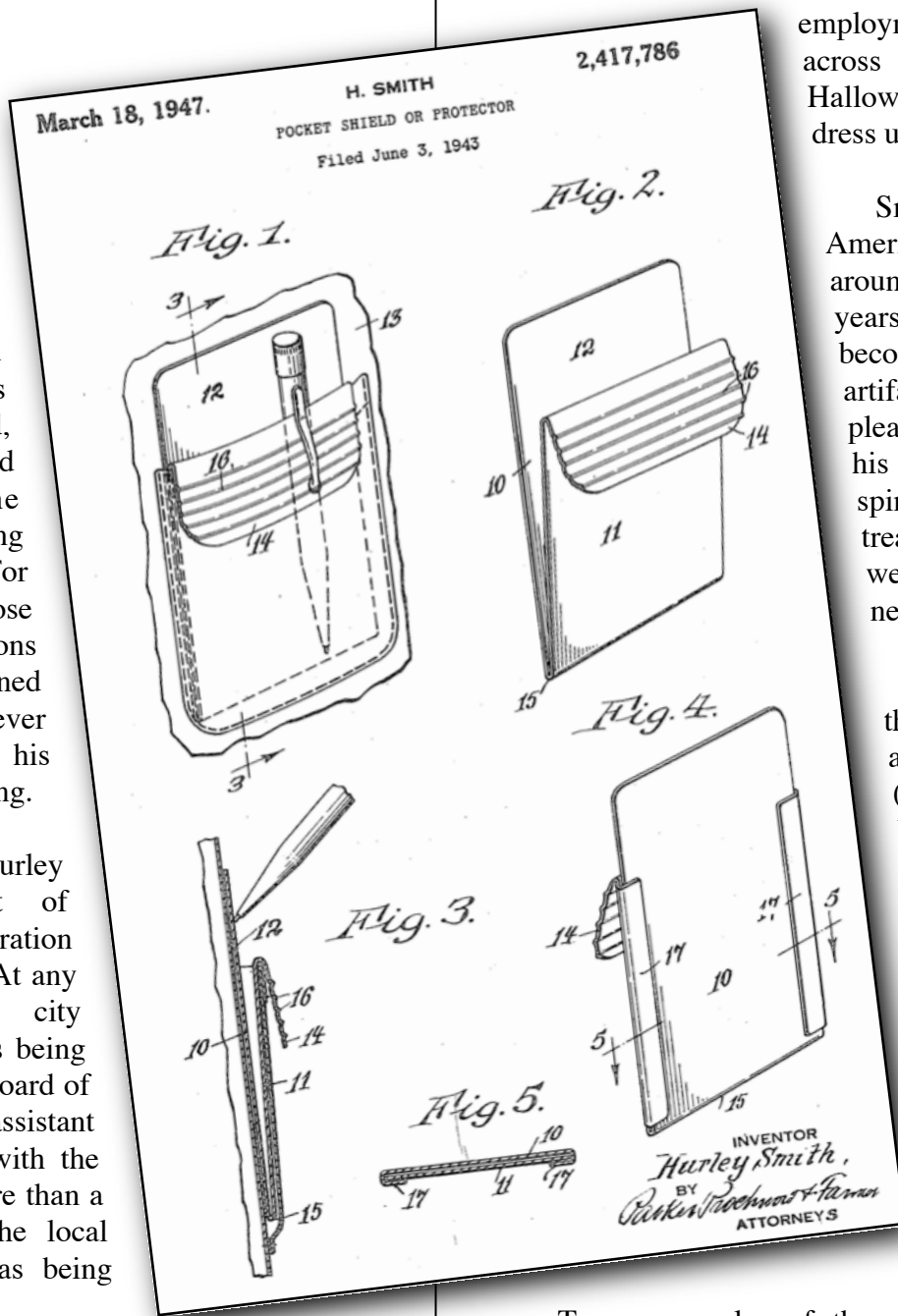
Smith did not rest on his laurels, as he took on the role of a realtor and developed the Brookwood Subdivision just outside of Wacousta, along the Looking Glass River, in southern Clinton County. Any further plans he may of had in this realm were cut short by his untimely death here on 16 April 1976.

While Hurley's invention become a cultural icon in the U.S., his creation receives comparatively little use in contemporary society. In the age of computers, PDAs and Smartphones, there is diminished need for traditional writing instruments and, thus, the pocket pouches for storing them. Consequently, today it can facetiously be said that one of the major employments of pocket shields across the country occurs at Halloween when kids want to dress up as geeks.

Smith's contribution to Americana has now been around for about seventy years, long enough to become an historical artifact. It would no doubt please Hurley to know that his invention and its spinoffs are increasingly treasured by collectors as well as some diehard nerds in the workplace.

The author wishes to thank local real estate agent Richard Gingras (Hurley's grandson) for bringing this subject to his attention.

*One of the pages from Smith's patent application*



To see samples of the products from Smith's Lansing "factory" and the industry he spawned, go to: [www.pojman.com/PP/pocket\\_protectors/pocket\\_protectors.html](http://www.pojman.com/PP/pocket_protectors/pocket_protectors.html).

<sup>1</sup> For a reproduction of this original document, including illustrations and explanatory text, go to: [www.pojman.com/PP/PP-2417786.pdf](http://www.pojman.com/PP/PP-2417786.pdf).



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Historical Society of Greater Lansing - Membership Application

Please accept my application for:

- New Membership
- Renewal Membership
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in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

I have enclosed:

- \$20 Individual Membership
- \$30 Family Membership
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