

# History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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

March 2012

## Potter House Museum Fundraiser

Friday, May 18, 2012 - 6:30pm to 8:30pm

The Historic Potter House - 1348 Cambridge, Lansing

\$50.00 per person

Mark your calendar's for HSGL's May fundraiser, a tour of the beautiful, historic Potter House. The owner of the home, HSGL member James McClurken, has graciously offered to open his home to the Historical Society for this special event. The evening will include an in-depth architectural tour of the home, led by Lansing architecture professor Jim Perkins. Please note that all of the money raised at the event will go towards our museum fund.

The home, which is truly a Lansing treasure, was built by Ray & Sarah Potter.\* Though its Tudor Revival style gives the home a traditional English feel, it is full of "modern" surprises, including the fact that the home is actually constructed of poured concrete! Designed by Harold Childs of East Lansing, the house is a fascinating combination of old-world excellence and modern American engineering

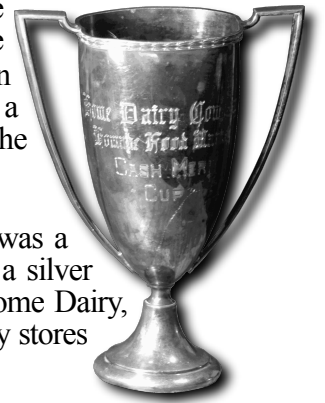
Perhaps what truly sets the Potter House above her peers are the stunningly beautiful hand painted murals that showcase exotic animals from around the world. These murals will be shown as a part of the house tour. Ray Potter, who commissioned the house in the 1926, is the son of James Potter, who gifted land to the City of Lansing for the establishment of a grand city park, today known as Potter Park Zoo. Like his father, Ray was a generous philanthropist who donated significant amounts of money to Lansing's Sparrow Hospital, as well as a variety of other institutions.

The generosity of the Potter family to the City of Lansing can be an inspiration to us all. If you would like to follow in their steps, and give a gift that will help establish a new Lansing cultural institution that will be valued for years to come, please consider partnering with the Historical Society of Greater Lansing in our efforts to raise money for a museum by purchasing a ticket to the event or by serving as an event sponsor. You will find ticket and sponsorship forms included in this newsletter.

*\*Please note that James Potter was incorrectly named the original owner of the Potter House in the February issue of The History Explorer.*

## Capital City Collections

In conjunction with our goal of establishing a Lansing area historical museum, the society is now accepting items into our collection for future display and exhibit! We'll be running an occasional short column in future newsletters, highlighting a new piece we've acquired for the society's collections.



This month's acquisition was a gift from an HSGL member. It's a silver plated trophy from the Lansing Home Dairy, awarded to a variety of area grocery stores in the 1930s.

## The Christman Company: A History

On Thursday evening, March 15 at 7:00 pm, The Christman Company will host the Historical Society of Greater Lansing at their national headquarters, located in the historic Mutual Building at 208 N. Capitol Avenue. Attendees will enjoy a talk by Chad Teeple, the Senior Project Manager of the Christman Company's work on the Accident Fund Building. Teeple will give a talk on the history of the Christman Company, which was founded in South Bend, Indiana in 1894, and has had offices in Lansing since 1915. He will also discuss Christman's ongoing work to preserve and restore historic icons, including our own capitol building. The evening will end with a tour of the historic building, which boasts of Double Platinum Historic LEED Certification.

## Other Upcoming HSGL Monthly Meetings

*A History of Baseball in Michigan* by author Peter Morris  
Thursday, April 19, 7:00 p.m.

*Jacobson's: I Miss It So!* by author Bruce Allen Kopytek  
Thursday, May 10, 7:00 pm

Both meetings will be held at the downtown Capital Area District Library branch.

**Fraternally Yours: The A.O.U.W. in Lansing and Michigan**  
**by Kris W. Rzepczynski**

Today, many of us think of secret societies as irrelevant groups with funny hats, scepters, and odd rituals. However, in the United States during the mid-to-late 1800's, and well into the twentieth century, no one affiliation outside of the church establishment had a more positive impact on local communities and its residents than fraternal organizations and secret societies. These benevolent groups supported their members and families financially and simultaneously built a common sense of community in thousands of local lodges all across the United States.

Dating back to the mid-nineteenth century, Lansing has a long history with fraternal organizations and secret societies, including the Free & Accepted Masons, Grand Army of the Republic, Knights of the Maccabees, Independent Order of Odd Fellows, Modern Woodmen of America, and many others. Although not as well known today as some of the societies mentioned above, the Ancient Order of United Workmen (AOUW) has a relatively brief yet interesting chapter in Lansing's fraternal history.

The Ancient Order of the United Workmen (AOUW) was founded in 1868 in Meadville, Pennsylvania by John Jordan Upchurch. Originally formed as a vehicle to improve the relationship between management and labor, the AOUW, in an effort to attract new members, soon adopted a benevolent life insurance plan for its members and widows – the first fraternal group to do so. This innovative idea quickly became the cornerstone of the fraternal organization, and local lodges soon sprouted up all over the United States. By 1895, AOUW membership across the United States in more than 6,000 local lodges totaled more than 318,000,4 an

amazing growth for an organization founded less than thirty years before. Equally impressive was the \$70,000 paid out to member's widows and orphans during the same time period, no small amount for the era.

Open to "all classes, as well as those who work with the head, as with the hands," the AOUW combined the "cheapest and most rational plan for mutual protection and security against the ravages of those merciless assailants of mankind, disease and death." The Workmen looked to unite members into a fraternal brotherhood, protect its members, widows, and orphans, encourage research in the sciences, and perhaps most important, create funds for the mutual aid and benefit of members and their widowed families. Although the society borrowed several Masonic features, the AOUW clearly had grander ambitions.

Here in Michigan, the AOUW was first organized in February 1877 and incorporated the following January. Local lodges quickly formed all across the state, including Detroit Lodge (No. 6) in May 1877, the May Flower Lodge (No. 47) of Williamston in May 1879, and the Island Lodge (No. 73) in Eaton County in June 1879. The aim of the state-level group, the Grand Lodge of Michigan, was "to improve the mental, moral and social condition of the members...and to provide for the relief of the families and heirs of deceased members of the said fraternity."

The first AOUW lodge in the city, Lansing Lodge (No. 54), was organized in 1878, and by 1888, the group was meeting twice a month at the hall over Cannell & Edmonds, the harness and saddler hardware manufacturers located at 107 South Washington Avenue. The lodge officers then included Ira E. Randall (Past Master Workman), Josiah Bruno (Master Workman), Charles D. Newell (Foreman), William C. Haines (Overseer), C. H. Thompson (Recorder), H. D. Pugh (Financier), George H. Cole (Receiver), J. H. McClure (Guide), A. F. Alton (Inside Watchman), and George W. Coleman (Outside Watchman). By 1892, the Lansing Lodge had grown enough to warrant meetings every week, now at the Good Templars Hall at 105 South Washington Avenue. The AOUW presence in Lansing continued to expand, as a female auxiliary, Capital City Lodge (No. 44), Degree of Honor, was formed in 1896

**Historical Society of Greater Lansing**

P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901  
[www.LansingHistory.org](http://www.LansingHistory.org)

*Officers & Board Members*

|                                 |                         |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Valerie Marvin - President      | Harry Emmons - Trustee  |
| Bill Castanier - Vice President | David Votta - Trustee   |
| Richard Hathaway - Secretary    | Lille Foster - Trustee  |
| Doug Johnson - Treasurer        | Adam Beckwith - Trustee |
| Nathalie Winans - Trustee       |                         |

and led by Fannie Blasius, Eliza A. Havens, and Hattie Holmes.

Finally, by 1898, the Lansing Lodge had its own meeting space, the AOUW Hall at 111 East Michigan Avenue. Although the image here of 113 East Michigan Avenue was taken in 1957, the old AOUW Hall is visible on the far left hand side; the cocktail lounge at 111 East Michigan Avenue is on the first floor, and the AOUW likely met in the upper floors. The lodge continued to meet at this address for approximately ten years, its longest tenure at one address.



However, as the AOUW enjoyed its own dedicated meeting space and hall, trouble loomed on the horizon. By 1907, with many of its original members passing away in great numbers, the organization struggled to meet the demand for insurance payments paid out to its deceased members' families. Annual dues were raised, and the death-spiral of higher costs and declining membership accelerated. The crisis came to a head in Detroit in July 1907, when the Grand Lodge of Michigan disbanded and surrendered its charter. The Detroit Free Press reported "they have seen thousands of their white-haired comrades drop out after paying the assessments for more than thirty years, unable to meet the demands of the new rate system and too old to find protection in any other insurance organization." By 1907, statewide membership in the AOUW had dropped off a cliff from a peak of 23,000 to only 3,000. Also considering the unpaid death claims totaling more than \$160,000, it is no wonder the group had difficulty paying the bills. Michigan's experience was hardly unique, though, as Indiana, Ohio, and Wisconsin all surrendered their respective charters prior to Michigan doing so. At the time of its dissolution, the Grand Lodge of Michigan had, remarkably, paid out more than \$8,000,000 in death claims to members'

families. Considering the society's 30-year history, that is no small achievement.

The decision to disband the state-level Grand Lodge of Michigan did not immediately impact the Lansing Lodge, however. As the Lansing Journal reported, "this will not affect the members of the Lansing lodge, however, as it is understood most of them will continue in the order through an arrangement made with the supreme lodge." Leading up to the Grand Lodge's dissolution, Lansing's lodge had experienced the same decline in membership as at the state level, dropping from 180 to only 26. Indeed, it is difficult to maintain an organization's long-term sustainability with such a small membership.

Despite the struggles of the Michigan AOUW, Lansing's female auxiliary soldiered on, as "the fall of the United Workmen order in the state will in no way affect the Degree of Honor, the ladies' auxiliary." Indeed, by 1910, Capital City Lodge No. 44 – the female auxiliary – was the only AOUW entry listed in the Lansing city directory, suggesting that Lansing Lodge No. 54 had ceased soon after the Grand Lodge of Michigan disbanded in 1907. Reinforcing this, the women's auxiliary was no longer meeting at the dedicated AOUW meeting hall space on East Michigan Avenue, but rather at the G.A.R. Hall at 213 North Washington Avenue. The AOUW had run its course, as the ladies auxiliary disappeared entirely from the directories soon thereafter.

The AOUW is just a small piece of the larger history of fraternal organizations in Lansing. Yet despite its short heyday, it serves as a good example illustrating the phenomenal growth and inevitable decline of benevolent societies and fraternal groups in the United States during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.



Historical Society of Greater Lansing  
P.O. Box 12095  
Lansing, MI 48901

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

---

Historical Society of Greater Lansing - Membership Application

Please accept my application for:

- New Membership
- Renewal Membership
- Gift Membership

in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

I have enclosed:

- \$20 Individual Membership
- \$30 Family Membership
- \$100 Business Membership
- \$\_\_\_\_\_ Additional Gift to HSGL

Member Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_ Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Please Send The Newsletter  
Via Email

Make Checks Payable to  
**Historical Society of Greater Lansing**

*The Historical Society of Greater Lansing is a 501 (c) (3) non-profit corporation.  
Thank you for your support of our programs and activities.*