

History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

April 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.*

A History of Baseball

Just in time to get ready for the start of the baseball season, nationally acclaimed baseball author Peter Morris will present a talk on the history of baseball in Michigan for the Historical Society of Greater Lansing. Mr. Morris will have books available for purchase and signing.

When: Thursday, April 19th, 7:00 pm

Where: Auditorium, downtown Capitol Area District Library
401 N. Capitol Ave., Lansing

Jacobson's, I Miss It So!

On Thursday evening, May 10, Michigan author Bruce Allen Kopytek will regale society members with stories of the beloved Jacobson's department stores. Meet the founders of the chain, the Jacobson family, and learn how they grew one humble store to a mid 20th century chain offering customers premier products. The evening will include the opportunity to purchase a copy of Mr. Kopytek's book, *Jacobson's, I Miss It So!* and have it signed by the author.

When: Thursday, May 10th, 7:00 pm

Where: CADL Downtown Lansing, 401 N. Capitol Ave.

A Place of Our Own!

On Tuesday, March 6th, HSGL board members signed a one year lease with Creyts Place Development to take on an office in the basement level of the Creyts building, located at 831 N. Washington St., Lansing! The space will be used for a variety of functions, including storing our permanent collections and staging small museum exhibits to be open to the public. We plan to host an opening party in it for our members this spring – a date will be coming soon.

Now that we have storage space for our permanent HSGL collections, we are working to bring in more objects for use in future exhibits. We are interested in a broad variety of items. A list of the types of objects we plan to collect can be found at our website, www.lansinghistory.org. Please call 517-282-0671 or send an e-mail to info@lansinghistory.org if you have something you'd like to donate.

The Creyts Home: A Place of Family, Hospitality, & Love

By Valerie Marvin, HSGL President

The author would like to thank Mrs. Susanne Creyts Gier Palmer, granddaughter of P.J. and Minnie Creyts, and Dave Muyllé for their assistance with this article.

The Creyts Building, the new home of the HSGL, began its life as a private home. Local businessman Phillip Jones Creyts (better known as P.J.) and his wife, Minnie, commissioned the home in the 1915, when their only daughter, Marian, was a young woman of eighteen. They moved into the house, which P.J. designed himself, in 1916.

Both P.J. and Minnie hailed from the Lansing area. P.J. was born on January 28, 1866 to Christian and Marian Creyts on the family farm in Delta Township. He had several siblings, including Don Creyts, former Ingham County treasurer, and Milan Creyts, for whom Creyts Road is named. On January 13, 1892, P.J. wed his life-long love, Minnie Christine Seibly. She was born to Herman, a farmer, and his wife Mary Ann Seibly on September 4, 1869. Before marrying, Minnie received an excellent education, having attended a private ladies college.



Though P.J. was never afforded the opportunity of a post high school education, it seemed as though everything he touched prospered. He began his professional career with the Lansing Company as a young man. He worked as a timber scout, choosing the woods that would be shipped back to Lansing for the manufacture of wheelbarrows. He

became so good at estimating board feet that he could walk into any home, and approximate the amount of wood used to build it. Throughout his career he would wear many different professional hats, including that of real estate developer, Secretary/Treasurer of the Capitol Electric Supply Company, and board member for several Lansing companies. Yet it was always his family that was most important to this successful man.

P.J. and Minnie built their new house in what was then a lovely residential neighborhood, making sure to obtain a fashionable Washington Avenue address. One lot south of the Creyts home on Washington stood the Italianate mansion of Judge and Mrs. Weist. The judge and his family often hosted P.J. and Minnie's family, including their grandchildren. Years later, Susanne still enjoys reminiscing over how she and her siblings enjoyed visiting the judge, who kept a large green talking parrot in his library.

The Creyts had a talent for identifying and acquiring the best products and wares. Their home was full of lovely imported Persian rugs, sold to P.J. by a dealer who gave him first choice of all his goods. Lovely tapestries depicting Shakespearian and natural scenes hung on their walls. Minnie's teapot, patterned in cheerful English chintz, occupied a place of honor in the built-in china cabinet in the octagonal breakfast room, located in the southwest corner of the first floor. Granddaughter Susanne enjoyed many special meals with her grandparents around the green wicker table there, during which they would watch the birds in the garden.

Entertaining was a joy for P.J. and Minnie. The Creyts had a large circle of friends who often visited them, eager to partake of their well-known hospitality. Minnie was an excellent hostess, seating as many as fourteen around her elegant dining table. The fare included the best that could be found in Lansing. A superb cook, Minnie was assisted by a housekeeper who served the meals when visitors came. Minnie would announce that they were ready for the next course by tapping with her foot a small

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901
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 | |

button under the table, which was wired to the kitchen, where the housekeeper would be notified. Many of the recipes for her tasty cookies and beautiful cakes survive today, and are frequently enjoyed by her descendants.

When dinner was over, P.J. would then invite the gentlemen to join him in a game of billiards. The entire third floor of their home, an open attic with slopping rooflines at the sides, was dedicated to the game. While the gentleman played, their wives would sit around the edge of the room, supervising the children who anxiously kept score on the cue racks.

The years the Creyts family spent in their North Washington Street home were full of celebrations. Not long after her graduation from the University of Chicago, where she earned a degree in economics, P.J. and Minnie's only child, Marian, married Raymond Gier, of Lansing. Raymond was the son of Burton Gier, who owned Gier Pressed Steel, and later a large stake in Motor Wheel. Raymond attended the University of Michigan, where he studied the Classics. During World War I Gier served in France, where he saw the horrors of conflict firsthand. Upon his return to Lansing, Raymond preferred a quiet country life on a farm outside of town with his wife and children to the noisy family offices at Motor Wheel. Raymond and Marian would have three children – Susanne, David, and Marilyn.

Perhaps the biggest event celebrated at the Creyts home was their annual New Year's Day dinner. On January first, the entire family would join P.J. and Minnie around their big table for a mouth-watering turkey dinner. P.J. had a standing order with a farm just outside of Lansing for the best turkey they had. One year the bird weighed a startling thirty-two pounds!

Every facet of the Creyts life involved their family, including business. In his later years, P.J. acquired a significant amount of property in the Lansing area. His daughter, Marian, often assisted him in keeping his books. P.J. managed the properties from home, at his large roll top

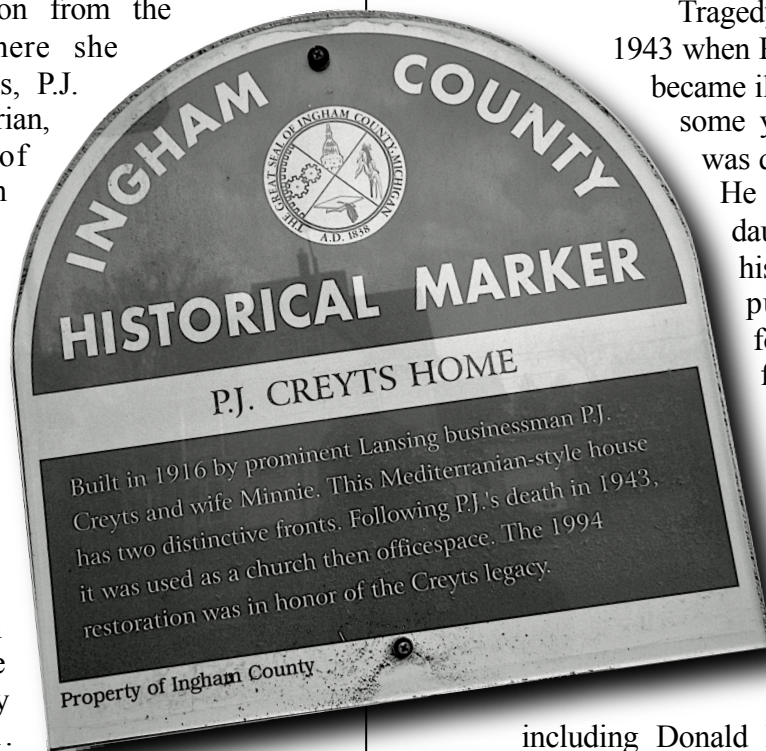
desk that sat in his office, just inside the front door. In the evenings, when business was done, he enjoyed sitting before the fireplace in the living room and listening to news programming on his beloved cabinet radio.

P.J. and Minnie also enjoyed traveling with their family. Every May the Creyts would cover their furniture at the Washington Avenue home in dust sheets and drive to their cabin on Burt Lake. There they hosted family and friends at the cabin all through the summer and into the fall. Among the frequent guests were their oldest grandchildren, Susanne and David. Susanne still has vivid memories of the wonderful summers spent on the lake where they would fish with P.J. and enjoy Minnie's fresh blueberry pie.

Tragedy struck the Creyts family in 1943 when P.J. died of a heart attack. He became ill while assisting Marian with some yard work at her home, and was quickly brought inside to rest. He died not long after, with his daughter and granddaughter at his side. He was mourned publicly in the days that followed by countless friends, family members, and former business associates from across the Lansing area. The Christian Science funeral service was read for him on October 21, 1943. The pall bearers at his funeral included some of Lansing's most respected community leaders,

including Donald Bates and James Edmonds, founders of the Historical Society of Greater Lansing.

After P.J.'s death Minnie could no longer manage the home on her own so she sold it and moved into the Porter Hotel. The house was subdivided into two apartments through during the war, and then in 1946 the First Universalist Church moved in. In 1954 the Mutual Benefit Life Insurance Co. bought the building and completed the transition to office use. Dr. Fred Brown purchased the building in 1961 and opened his practice on the first floor. In the 1980s, Capitol City Foot Care operated here. Business partners Herbert Schultz and Dave Muylle formed Creyts Place Development in 1993 and acquired the building. After a beautiful restoration by the new owners, the property received an Ingham County Historical Marker in 1994.





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.*