



# History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

February 2013

## HSGL Spring English Inn Fundraiser Wednesday, May 15, 2013 - 6:00pm-8:00pm

HSGL is pleased to announce that we will be having an exclusive, behind the scenes tour of Meadowvue, today known as the English Inn, for our spring fundraiser. The event will take place from 6:00pm-8:00pm on Wednesday, May 15, and will include an in-depth, behind the scenes tour of the house and grounds, as well as delicious hors d'oeuvres and desserts. Tickets will be \$50 per person. Look for more information about the event coming soon!

## Lansing High School Days Exhibit Open!

A big thanks to everyone who has visited HSGL's current exhibit, *Lansing High School Days*, at the Cretys Building. The exhibit has been open a month and we have already had more than a hundred visitors attend. Thanks you also to everyone who loaned or donated items for the exhibit.

The exhibit will be open Sunday, March 3, 1:00-4:00 pm. The exhibit is located at the Cretys Building, 831 N. Washington, Lansing.

The exhibit will also be open for viewings by alumni groups, neighborhood organizations, classes, and other interested groups by appointment. Send an e-mail to [info@lansinghistory.org](mailto:info@lansinghistory.org) or call 517-282-0671 to schedule a private viewing today.

## Museum Update

The HSGL is pleased to announce that HSGL collections curator Adina Langer is busy setting up HSGL's very own collections storage system. Soon, our objects will be catalogued and will eventually be available online through our website for people to peruse and enjoy. The project, though, takes a lot of work. If you are interested in helping Adina with the cataloguing process, we'd love to hear from you! Please call Adina at (609)297-7023 or email her at [artiflection@gmail.com](mailto:artiflection@gmail.com) to volunteer.

## Upcoming HSGL Events

### *Hotel Kerns Fire*

Thursday, February 21, 2013 - 7:00pm  
Downtown Library - 401 S. Capitol Avenue

Local author and physician Dr. Barbara Saxena will talk about her research on the 1934 Hotel Kerns fire, which is considered to be the worst in Lansing history, causing 32 deaths and over forty additional injuries. Saxena first came across the fire while working on her family tree. Her interest in the event led her to eventually write a historical novel, *Souviens*, based on the event.

### *A History of Michigan's Grand Hotel*

Thursday, March 21, 2013 - 7:00pm  
Downtown Library - 401 S. Capitol Avenue

Mackinac Island Grand Hotel Historian Bob Tagatz will give a talk about the history of Mackinac Island's beautiful Grand Hotel, considered by many of be one of the nation's choice historic destinations.

## Lansing Eats! Exhibit

The next HSGL exhibit will focus on Lansing's food culture. At present, we are looking for objects to be loaned or donated for the exhibit in the following areas:

- Menus, ephemera and objects related to Lansing-area restaurants and food purveyors;
- Ration books or anything related to victory gardening during WWII;
- Cooking-related appliances purchased in Lansing;
- Bottles or containers from Lansing-area food and beverage companies (like QD or Hi-Klas);
- Recipe-compilation books from Lansing-area religious and community organizations.

If you have something you would consider sharing with us, please contact Adina Langer at (609) 297-7023 or e-mail her at [artiflection@gmail.com](mailto:artiflection@gmail.com).

**Saving Herrmann House**  
by Bill Castanier

Driving south on Capitol Avenue in downtown Lansing it's easy to miss the Herrmann House tucked away among the more modern buildings on the campus of Lansing Community College.

By all accounts the Herrmann House could have fallen under the wrecking ball by now. Plagued by falling ceilings, collapsing floors, faulty electrical wiring and nasty termites, the Herrmann House had seen its grander days from when it was the home to John T. Herrmann, one of Lansing most prominent business owners, and his family.

Located at 520 N. Capitol Ave. it was truly one of the more elegant homes on the Avenue only a few blocks north of the State Capitol and a short walk to downtown where John T. Herrmann established his successful tailor shop in 1878 at 218 North Washington. Designed by the architect J. Arthur Bailey and built in 1893, some 20 years after the Herrmann family emigrated to the U.S. from Bernsberg Germany, the home would stay in the family until 1966 when it was sold to Lansing Community College.

When it was constructed it was seen as a prominent location for a family growing in status. Capitol Avenue was bustling and numerous elegant homes stretched North and South out from Michigan Avenue. Today, the Herrmann House is one of handful remaining.

After the death of John T. Herrmann in 1898, his sons Christian and Henry would run the tailoring business and Charles, inherited the house. He rented it to his brother Christian who ultimately purchased it, moving his spouse Agnes and son Christian Jr. into the home.

When the elder Christian died in 1949, Agnes lived in the home until 1963 when she died. After that the Catholic

diocese rented the home for one year. In 1966, Dr. Christian Herrmann Jr., sold the house to LCC.

Susan Brewster of Okemos, who is the great granddaughter of John T. Herrmann, recalls the home and playing Nancy Drew as a child in the "phone closet" nestled under the master staircase to the second floor.

Brewster's father, Henry Richard, the son of Henry and the grandson of John T. Herrmann, was later in partnership with the elder Herrmann's son Christian in the tailor business and later ran it on his own until it closed in 1965.

She also remembers playing in the large horse barn behind the house which was used later as a garage. The barn was torn down when LCC secured the property. Brewster's grandfather had built a home (now gone) nearby at 811 N. Washington Avenue and it was an easy cut across back yards to visit the original Herrmann home.

"My aunt Angela (the spouse of Christian Herrmann Sr.) also had a pet skunk (descended) which she let play in the backyard," she said.

As with most homes of that era, the Herrmann house was modernized several times to adapt to changing family size and tastes. While the Christian Herrmann Sr. family still occupied the home a master bedroom with an adjacent bathroom was created on the second floor by merging two smaller bedrooms. On the first floor a wall defining a front parlor was torn out to create a much larger living room and birch wainscoating was removed from the former parlor. A large pocket door was salvaged and was moved to a commercial structure downtown according to Dr. Christian Herrmann.

Over the years, Lansing Community College utilized the home for everything from a conference center to offices. During that time numerous layout and structural changes were made to accommodate barrier free design and offices.

In 1984, a second staircase was constructed off a bedroom area to access the third floor attic space which was finished for office space and a meeting area.

On the first floor, a den off the living room was eliminated and extra space was used for a barrier free bathroom and a roomier kitchen. In the 1990s a large sunroom was added off the dining room and during recent construction a butler's pantry was eliminated. A large koi pond and Japanese garden just off the sunroom was built in 2006.

Dr. Christian Herrmann has fond memories of growing up in the house.



**Historical Society of Greater Lansing**

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www.LansingHistory.org

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"I enjoyed living in the city. It was very handy to go to Lansing High which was just across the street. And when I went to West Junior High I would walk through the Capitol to warm up in the winter."

Dr. Herrmann recalls the successful tailoring business operated by several generations of Herrmann's.

"They had 35-59 tailors who would make coats, pants and vests for the businessmen in Lansing," he said.

In addition, Christian said the tailors would travel city to city conducting trunk shows and selling made-to-measure suits, "The men had cards with their measurements recorded on them and I always thought they were like medical charts."

The Herrmann tailoring business competed against nine other custom tailor businesses all located nearby each other in downtown Lansing. In addition, numerous dressmakers and department stores lined the streets of Michigan and Washington Avenues. Most of the names are lost from history with the exception of Knapps, Arbaugh's and Kositcheks.

Dr. Herrmann, now 92 and living in southern California, also remembers the elegance of the home with its dark wainscoting with four different woods of oak, walnut, cherry and burlled birch.

He said his mother kept a fruit room in the Michigan basement and his father had wine shipped in casks from California which he stored in the basement.

"He would decant them and put the bottles in a big wood box filled with sand in the basement."

As a young boy Dr. Herrmann remembers creating a small secret room in the space between the first floor staircase and second floor where he would play.

He said when he sold the house to LCC he always had hopes that the then President, Philip Gannon, would live in the home, but that never came to fruition.

He said he's recently read about some opposition to "spending too much" for the restoration and remodeling of the Herrmann House as a president's home.

"I'm delighted and I don't think there should be any carping."

Although the home has gone through significant changes in the last 114 years much of it still retains the

character of the original building with its beautiful detailed wood work and ceilings.

With the exception of the sunroom which is off to the side and back and an attached hallway to the adjacent Rogers-Carrier home very little has changed on the exterior of the house; although the original slate roof has been replaced with the current asphalt shingles.

Valerie Marvin, president of the Historical Society of Greater Lansing said the home is a classic example of a tudor revival style which was becoming popular at the time it was built with two bold projections on each side and a natural stone front porch giving the home a somewhat castle feel to it.



She said the home has decorative beveled glass which at the time was more sought after than stained glass. It also has three stained glass windows on the landing of the staircase leading to the second floor.

The decorative living room fireplace mantel is hand carved and two lion head medallions grace each end. Another lion head anchors the railing on the stairs to the second floor.

The house, originally built at a cost of \$5000, is listed on the State of Michigan Registry of Historic Sites and restoration work was completed to be in compliance with federal rehabilitation standards according to the LCC. The home is now occupied by the current President of LCC, Brent Knight and his spouse Rise, with the first floor to be used for LCC and community events.

"The board is committed to continuing to strengthen our relationship with our students and the downtown community by asking the President to be ever-present on campus," said Board Chair Larry Meyer.

"When the Herrmann House was built in 1893, it was common for executives to live within walking distance of their work. Over time, that has changed. We want to help restore and revive that sense of community.

By changing the use of the Herrmann House from an infrequently used meeting and conference space to a presidential residence, we are stating our continued support for and investment in the City of Lansing, particularly its downtown area, which is home to our main campus."

Although the Herrmann home, once seen as a "white elephant", will, over time with its traditional tudor elements and its variety of textures and breadth of detail, be seen as a respite from the busy street and a tribute to a more elegant era.



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ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

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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

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- \$20 Individual Membership
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- \$100 Business Membership
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