



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

August 2013

HSGL August Activities

**Newly Added* Old Town Walking Tour
Saturday, August 3, 2013 – 12:30pm*

Join HSGL for a walk through Old Town just before MICA's annual Jazz Fest! Join Valerie Marvin & Jesse LaSorda and discover what puts the 'Old' in Old Town. The tour meets at Clark Hill Parking lot at the intersection of Turner and Grand River Streets.

*Lansing Eats! Exhibit Open
Sunday, August 4, 2013 – 1:00pm-4:00pm
Creys House, 831 N. Washington*

Satisfy your craving for Lansing history with a visit to our Lansing Eats! exhibit featuring local cookbooks, rare china, vintage restaurant menus, and more!

*Behind the Facades Walking Tour
Saturday, August 17, 2013 – 10:00am
Lansing City Hall*

Learn why Lansing's buildings look the way they do. We'll discuss a variety of architectural styles found in Lansing ranging over a 130-year-plus timespan, and discuss some of the famous businesses that were inside these landmarks. Buildings include: Comerica Bank, the Liebermann's building, Knapp's, Arbaugh's, the Hollister building, and others.

*Gunnisonville Cemetery Tour
Sunday, August 18, 2013 – 2:00pm*

Learn the history of Gunnisonville at our annual cemetery tour. We'll visit the graves of some founding families, important business people, and veterans. We'll also see some unique grave markers, including a bulldog! After the tour the Gunnisonville Schoolhouse and Gunnisonville United Methodist Church will be open for tours.

Silent Auction Date Set

*Saturday, October 5th 4:00 – 6:30 pm
John Dye Water Plant - 148 South Cedar Street*

Mark your calendars for October 5, HSGL's annual silent auction to benefit our museum fund. This year's auction is being hosted by the Lansing Board of Water and Light at the John Dye Water Conditioning Plant at 148 S. Cedar St. in Lansing. Sponsorships and donations of auction items are being sought. If you'd like to serve as a sponsor or a donor, please visit the website, www.lansinghistory.org, and fill out our donor form there.

Among the items already donated are:

- A ride in a Lansing REO
- Mid-century Modern Cocktail Set
- Lots of Books!
- A ride in a vintage Michigan State Police Car
- Gift Certificates for restaurants, massages, theatre tickets, and boat rides
- Assorted Michigan museum memberships

If you have an item you'd like to donate, please contact us at 517-282-0671 or info@lansinghistory.org. Donations of wine are also being sought for a wine bottle toss at this year's auction. If you'd like to donate a bottle, you can bring it to the Lansing Eats! exhibit opening in August or September.

Memories of Coral Gables

by Bill Castanier

If East Lansing's Coral Gables had a theme song, it would have to be "Memories are Made of This."

Sitting on the border between East Lansing and Meridian Township, the Coral Gables has been more than a roadhouse, bar and restaurant for tens of thousands of MAC and MSU students along with Lansing residents since it first opened in the 1920s with the fancy pants name Fleur-de-Lis Inn.

Take Lois and Everett Downing of Mason. During World War II the couple went on their first date at the Gables. Lois was 16, Everett 20. It was a blind date. It was a friend of a friend sort of thing and Lois still remembers their first dance and surprisingly the song that was playing, "You Belong to My Heart" by Bing Crosby.

Lois remembers the Coral Gables as the "hotspot" back then especially when the big bands played. "A lot of soldiers met there when they came home on leave," she recalls. "You grew up fast with soldiers thinking 'Hey, will I ever see this place again?'"

Two weeks after that big dance Lois and Everett were engaged. They married when Lois graduated from high school. A couple of summers ago the Downings returned to the Gables for their 65th wedding anniversary party. Lois had "their song" played.

And they danced once again, like college sweethearts.

Their legacy of memories extends to their son Dave Downing, who as a teenager in the late 1960s, was a part-time disc jockey at WILS Radio in Lansing and spun records at the Gables for private parties. He recalls people often requesting the Beatles' "Hey Jude" as the last slow song.

"I think it had something to do with it being a seven-minute song," he says.

Many MSU students and Lansing residents of that era had their first legal drink there as the Gables would give the 21st-birthday celebrant one free drink and a small pizza. Contrary to its reputation, the Gables was tough to sneak into and ID checkers saw it as a badge of honor to confiscate fake IDs.

Others may have met their future spouse on the dance floor, attended a daddy-daughter Sorority event, seen the Miss Michigan pageant, appeared in the Show Bar when Playboy recruited center folds or attended a meeting of one of the many social clubs that regularly held meetings there.

Many MSU groups, such as the Vets Club, the Sailing Club and the Ski Club, held their meetings at the Gables. Controversial speakers Allen Ginzburg and Timothy Leary reportedly spoke and read poetry at the Rathskeller after being banned on campus.

Okemos resident Phil Weichman, MSU grad and a bartender at the Gables in the late 1960s, says those years marked the beginning of the end of its heyday. When East Lansing went wet in 1970, numerous bars such as Lizards would open and give the Gables stiff competition. Newer night clubs such as The Stables sitting right across on Grand River Avenue and Grandmothers on Michigan Avenue would siphon off student crowds.



Although the Gables first opened in the 1920s as a roadhouse, it went through many changes over the decades. In the 1930s it was known as the Green Gables, a square dance Hall boasting a roller rink. In the 1940s it evolved into a big band showcase known as the Coral Gables Ballroom and attracted well known musicians such as Tommy Dorsey, Duke Ellington, Stan Kenton, Woody Herman and the Ink Spots.

After being destroyed by a fire in August 1957, the Gables was rebuilt by then owner Tom Johnson, the man who masterminded the bar atmosphere so attractive to MSU students. Johnson opened several other "Coral Gables" bars across the state, along with the Old Crow Bar in Saugatuck, which continues operating to this day. When the East Lansing Gables re-opened in the late 1950s, the Big Band era was being ushered out by the emergence of Rock and Roll. It did not take long for the Gables to adapt to change as it began featuring many rockers, including the likes of Chubby Checker and Little Richard- now Hall of Famers.

In the 1960s the Gables became the place for MSU students to go for weekend entertainment. Its famous Show Bar could legally hold 350, but on a good night it might have packed twice that number. Former patrons recall that up to a hundred couples might be dancing at one time to such tunes as "Shout!" And "Wooly Bully."

Robert "Boogie Bob" Baldori, '71, Lansing attorney and boogie woogie artist, played there With the Woolies-their biggest hit, "Who Do You Love," made the national charts-and attracted sell-out crowds.

"The Gables was packed to the max with lines out the door," recalls Baldori.

"We played there dozens of times." The bands were selected for how they could get the kids dancing, recalls Baldori. "Johnson wanted the kids dancing so he could sell more beer," he explains.

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901
www.LansingHistory.org

Officers & Board Members

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Valerie Marvin - President | Adina Langer - Trustee |
| Bill Castanier - Vice President | Jesse LaSorda - Trustee |
| Adam Beckwith - Secretary | Erik Nelson - Trustee |
| Tim Kaltenbach - Treasurer | Zig Olds - Trustee |
| Joan Bauer - Trustee | Anne Wilson - Trustee |
| Harry Emmons - Trustee | Nathalie Winans - Trustee |

The Gables hired local bands like Plain Brown Wrapper, the Kingtones, the Otherside and the Cordarons. One popular group was the Sunliners, which morphed into Rare Earth ("Get Ready Cause Here I Come"). A group called Me and Dem Guys recorded the 45 single "Black Cloud" at the Gables one summer and it became the default house band for the 1966-67 school year.

There was seldom any trouble at the Gables, which employed very brawny "floor managers"-a euphemism for bouncer. More often than not they were MSU football players. At that time, it was perfectly legitimate for football players to work.

Until the 1970s only men were allowed to be waiters in the show bar. Dressed in khakis and white shirts, they were trained by Johnson and current owner Alex Vanis to be efficient. They learned to move adroitly through the crowd clearing bottles and asking, "Can I get you another one?"

The bar featured Happy Hours and special nights, such as Ripple Night and Quart Night with Altes for 50 cents. There was also Spaghetti Night, Hot Dog Night, Vets Night and a never-ending array of other special nights but the big night was Thursdays and lines began forming real early.

Thursday night became the defacto Greek night and a select group of sorority women and men known as the Society for the Advancement of Extra Curricular Activities (SAECA) would get there early and retreat to a small backroom where they would come up with new ideas for drinks and promotions- much like an advisory board for a company.

The members of SAECA also cranked out a weekly mimeographed sheet called The State Urinal. Typically 8-10 pages long, the publication featured one main article, a humorous essay and pages of bawdy one-liners. It began publishing in the late 1950s and adopted the rapid-fire, one-liner comedic style of Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In.

The Urinal was meant to be savored and tossed, so few have survived the trash bin. Jamie (Bobit) Wiechman, an MSU grad, who worked as a cashier at the Gables, saved a handful of copies- which was fortunate, because the Urinal provides great insight into the student culture and ethos of the times.

The mimeo sheet contained a wide range of content ranging from world events and political commentary to the love follies of fraternity and sorority members. Its humor ranged from satire and gossip to zany, inane fun. Some of the material was cute, some ironic ("Somebody should do something about apathy"), and some-"I think I asked Jamie to marry me, Phil"-prophetic. Phil and Jamie, both MSU grads, did marry and now live in Okemos.

Although MSU students went to the Gables primarily to drink and dance, they were just as likely to have visited the II Forno Room for a homecoming lunch with parents or the basement Rathskeller for a quieter atmosphere.

Many academic campus groups met regularly at the Gables. For example, Excalibur, the senior men's honors society, met there weekly for lunch while donning special sport coats. Former Gov. James Blanchard remembers wearing his blue blazer with the stylized X on the pocket for a weekly Excalibur lunch. He says MSU luminaries such as Duffy Daugherty, Biggie Munn or political scientist Wesley Fischel would stop by to speak. Other members of Excalibur who met at the Gables include the late Dallas Cowboy star Pete Gent, author of North Dallas Forty and Ken Beachler, the first director of MSU's Wharton Center for Performing Arts.

The Gables has indeed endured, but former MSU students will hardly recognize it today. Alex Vanis, '54, a graduate of MSU's The School of Hospitality Business, has completely transformed the place. Vanis and investors bought the Gables in 1968 from Tom Johnson. With an onslaught of new bars around town, Vanis decided to end live bands in 1985. He converted the Gables into a family restaurant and a meeting place catering to older patrons. Vanis' son, Stewart, helps run the Gables today.



Visitors often wonder about the significance of a giant duck that guards the back entrance to the Gables. The 10-foot, paper-maché figure was the informal mascot of the World War II veterans group that began meeting at the Gables after the war. Some believe it might have been a part of a Homecoming or Water Carnival float. It remains intact.

On display near the entrance of the Coral Gables are some classic menus from the past. Retired MSU Professors Jim and Gloria Kielbaso of Okemos remember ordering from some of those menus. They frequented the Gables as young graduate students in 1963. Gloria would drive up from Dayton, OH, with her friends to visit Jim, then a graduate student in forestry. When they married they would continue to frequent the Gables.

"It was the only place to go," Gloria recalls, who adds that recently Jim hosted a 60th birthday celebration there for her.

When it opened the Gables was smack dab in the middle of the countryside. Across the street was Northwind Farms, where race horses were bred and trained. In the 1960s Northwind was converted into a blues bar. The trailer park sprawling behind the Gables today used to be a horse training track and an airport.

John Patenge, '73, remembers as a young boy riding his bicycle to the Gables from his home just east of it on Park Lake Road. "When I was 10 or 12 it seemed like an exotic place," he recalls. "You could hear the loud music outside." Later, he recalls, his Okemos high school football team had their banquet in the Rathskeller Room- courtesy of Tom Johnson, who had two sons on the team.

Memories are made of this. Thanks, Coral Gables.



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.*