



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

March 2017

Upcoming Events

The Filth of Progress

Saturday, March 11, 2017 - 1:00 p.m.

*Library of Michigan, Lake Michigan Room (4th Floor) -
702 W. Kalamazoo*

In his book, *The Filth of Progress*, Dr. Ryan Dearinger explores the untold side of a well-known American story. For more than a century, accounts of progress in the West exclaimed the technological feats performed during the building of canals and railroads, while lionizing the capitalists who financed the projects. This book salvages stories often omitted from the triumphant narrative of progress by focusing on the suffering and survival of the workers who were treated as outsiders. Ryan Dearinger examines the moving frontiers of canal and railroad construction in the tumultuous years of American expansion, from the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 to the joining of the Central Pacific and Union Pacific railroads in 1869. He tells the story of the immigrants and Americans—Irish, Chinese, Mormons, and native-born citizens—whose labor created the West's infrastructure and turned the nation's dreams of a continental empire into a reality. Dearinger reveals that canals and railroads were not static monuments to progress but moving spaces of conflict and contest.

Calling All Collectors

Saturday, March 18, 2017 - 11:00 a.m. - 2:00 p.m.

Delta Township District Library - 5130 Davenport Dr.

This year HSGL will be co-sponsoring the 3rd Annual Collectors Showcase to be held March 18 from 11:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. at the Delta Township District Library. Collectors willing to display their collections and talk to the public about their passion are needed for this just-for-fun, no buying or selling event. Collections at past events have included both antique and contemporary collectibles, such as Pez dispensers, vintage hats, postcards, dolls, Dionne quintuplet memorabilia, Lansing

dairy items, and salt and pepper shakers. All collections suitable for family viewing are welcome. One collection will receive the People's Choice Award, chosen by visitors the day of the event.

In addition to HSGL, the Collectors Showcase is co-sponsored by the Delta Township Historical Society and the Delta Township District Library. The event will be held at the library, at 5130 Davenport Dr., located off Elmwood across from Sharp Park. For more information or to register as a collector, contact Thomas Moore, DTDL Adult Services Librarian, tmoore@dtld.org, or 517-321-4014, or check the library website under Events at www.dtdl.org/collectors.

Building a Better World – the Life and Career of Governor Frank Murphy

Saturday, April 22, 2017 - 1:30 p.m.

*Michigan State Capitol, Speaker's Library Room 252 -
100 N. Capitol Ave.*

Capitol Historian Valerie Marvin will give a talk on Governor Frank Murphy, who held the chief executive's office from 1937-1938, in conjunction with HSGL's series on the historic events of 1937.

Murphy remains today one of Michigan's most accomplished sons. Born in the small Thumb town of Harbor Beach in 1890, he attended school at the University of Michigan and served in World War I as a young man. After practicing law privately in Detroit for several years, Murphy became the Chief Assistant Attorney General for the Eastern District of Michigan and then served on the Recorder's Court from 1923-1930. It was here that he gained fame as the judge for the Sweet Trial, a nationally watched case involving an African-American family who moved into a white neighborhood and was subsequently attacked. He served

Continued on page 3

Hollywood's Betty Hutton & the Lansing Historical Society

By Valerie Marvin

On November 18, 1950, the Lansing Historical Society, a predecessor of today's modern HSGL, brushed shoulders with the likes of Hollywood royalty when film star Betty Hutton, aka the "Blonde Bombshell," came to town for a day of celebrations and pomp. The occasion was the kickoff of the annual Red Stocking drive (an annual holiday effort to give gifts to struggling area families and children) and the premier of her newest film, a musical entitled *Let's Dance*, starring Hutton and Hollywood icon Fred Astaire.

Thoroughly star-struck, Mayor Crego, Governor Williams, and the entire City of Lansing rolled out the red carpet for Hutton, who was then at the height of her fame. The mayor designated "Betty Hutton Day" and issued a proclamation honoring the star that read:

"WHEREAS, the City of Lansing and its citizens desire to accord every honor to those who gained fame in their respective chosen vocations; and

WHEREAS, one of Lansing's former residents, a girl who has reached the peak in the world of entertainment, announcing that she will visit this community, her former home where she started her meteoric rise to fame; and

WHEREAS, the city of Lansing and its citizens most heartily endorse and generously support the Christmas charity activities of the Red Stocking club now in its 20th year, providing for the needy children of the community;

THEREFORE, I, Ralph W. Crego, mayor of Lansing, do hereby proclaim Saturday, Nov. 18, 1950, as 'Betty Hutton Day' in Lansing and proudly welcome Miss Hutton to our community and her return to her former home, commending her most highly for so generously giving of her time to assist in launching the 1950 Red Stocking Club Fund campaign."

The true story is, as might be suspected, is a little more complex. In truth, Hutton wasn't actually born in Lansing, and she only lived a few miserable years of her childhood here. Regardless, though, the capital city was happy to claim her as their own during the height of her fame.

Betty Hutton was actually born on February 26, 1921, in Battle Creek, Michigan, to Percy and Mabel Thornburg. Percy, a railroad worker, abandoned his wife and two daughters (Betty had an older sister named Marion who would also go on to change her name to Hutton) when the girls were young. Mabel struggled to support her two daughters, moving to Lansing in the middle of the 1920s. The 1926 city directory includes an entry for a Mabel Thornburg living at 1116 1/2 W. St. Joseph Street who was then working at Olds. One year later the family was living at 1315 1/2 N. Grand River Ave, and by 1928 they had relocated to 114 E. Jefferson. Tradition holds that Betty's mother ran a speakeasy during this period and may have had problems with the police. Betty would later claim that it was in Lansing where she first performed as a very young child, singing with her sister in her mother's establishment.

After only a few years in town the Thornburgs moved on to Detroit, where Mabel worked in another auto factory and continued to frequent, if not actually operate, bars. In an interview that ran in the *Detroit Free Press* in 1972, when Hutton was attempting to make a professional comeback, she recalled this period as being very dark. "I don't know why I didn't turn to be a whore or something," she says, "living in the neighborhood we lived in, three families in a flat." She credited the kindness of neighbors, particularly a minister at the nearby Berea Tabernacle, for her survival. "He fed me," she says. "I had no food to eat half the time... I don't know how I made it... except that I found that church and they pulled me out of it." As a teenager Betty dropped out of high school and took jobs doing housekeeping and ironing shirts in the attempt to earn a few dollars to get by. Her big break came when bandleader Vincent Lopez heard Betty sing in a night club in Detroit. He subsequently hired her, setting her on the path to fame.

Continued next page

Highlights of Betty Hutton's Visit



Historical Society of Greater Lansing

P.O. Box 12095 ~ Lansing, MI 48901

www.LansingHistory.org

Officers & Board Members

Bill Castanier – President	Mary Kwas – Trustee
Valerie Marvin – Vice President	Jesse LaSorda – Trustee
Ron Emery – Secretary	Jacob McCormick – Trustee
Tim Kaltenbach – Treasurer	Zig Olds - Trustee
Joan Bauer - Trustee	Bob Rose - Trustee
Harry Emmons – Trustee	Anne Wilson - Trustee

By 1940 Betty and her mother were living in New York City, where the fledging star hoped to break into the theatre scene. She appeared in the Broadway revue *Two for the Show*, before being offered the chance to move to Hollywood. Her first major role in *The Fleet's In*, earned her good reviews. Throughout the 1940s Betty kept up an ambitious schedule of shooting, playing roles that ranged from the funny to the romantic in films such as *Star Spangled Rhythm*, *The Miracle of Morgan's Creek*, *And the Angels Sing*, *Here Come the Waves*, *Incendiary Blonde*, *The Stork Club*, *The Perils of Pauline*, and the poorly reviewed *Dream Girl*. In 1950 she won the title role of Annie Oakley in *Annie Get Your Gun*, after Judy Garland withdrew from the film due to illness.

Hutton's return to Lansing in 1950 was front page news. "Hutton 'Wows' Lansing," the headline in *The State Journal* read. A series of articles from the November 19, 1950, newspaper chronicled the star's visit, which included a luncheon in the Hotel Olds, where Hutton joined Governor G. Mennen and Mrs. Williams, Mayor and Mrs. Crego, and a host of business leaders, clergy, school officials, reporters, and theatrical folk. Following their meal, Miss Hutton and her mother accompanied Lansing Historical Society president John F. Brisbin and past president Seymour H. Person to her former home at 114 E. Jefferson, where they placed a plaque noting that the famous film star once lived in the humble home.

That evening Miss Hutton was the guest of honor in a parade that wound its way through downtown to the old Michigan Theatre, where the star's newest film was scheduled to show. "There the actress alighted from her Oldsmobile convertible to receive with her mother, Mrs. Gilbert Adams, keys to the city from Mayor Crego. Inside the theatre a crowd that jammed the auditorium from the orchestra pit to the last row in the balcony waited to see the premiere of Miss Hutton's newest picture, *Let's Dance*, in which she co-starred with Fred Astaire. But before the picture flashed on the screen, Miss Hutton appeared on the stage to sing the numbers in which she is featured in the film," *The State Journal* chronicled.

For Lansing, it was a magical evening. Here, on the Lansing stage, was a Hollywood actress at the peak of her career, who came back to one of her childhood homes to acknowledge her past and lend her star power to the local community. Though the day was certainly a celebration, Hutton chose to acknowledge her humble origins, perhaps as a way of encouraging donations to the Red Stocking fundraising drive, which would benefit families much like hers. Even to the famous celebrity it seemed a bit surreal. "If then anyone had said to us that we (meaning she and her mother) would someday be guests of honor at a luncheon at which the governor of the state of Michigan would introduce us, we would have questioned the person's sanity and probably called a policeman to have him taken away," she said.

Ultimately, Hutton's career began to fade not long after her Lansing visit. In the 1950s she publicly quarreled with Hollywood directors, who stopped casting her in their films. A series of failed marriages and problems with addiction left her destitute and struggling. In an interesting parallel to her youth, Hutton found herself once again aided by a kindly minister. According to her obituary in the New York Times Hutton credited the Rev. Peter Maguire of St. Anthony's Church of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, for saving her life. In the 1980s Betty returned to school, earning first her high school diploma, then a Master's degree in psychology from Salve Regina, a Catholic school in Newport. She taught comedy and oral interpretation at Boston's Emerson College for a period before returning to sunny California, where she died in 2007.

The author would like to thank Mr. Don Romano for bringing Hutton's Lansing connection to her attention in 2016 when he contacted HSGL to learn the status of the plaque placed on Betty's Lansing house. At present, the plaque remains missing. Anyone who knows of it, or has other Lansing-related Hutton stories, is encouraged to contact the author at info@lansinghistory.org or 517-282-0671.

Upcoming Events *Continued from page 1*

as Mayor of Detroit from 1930-1933, when he was appointed the Governor General of the Philippines by President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

Murphy returned to Michigan in 1936 to defeat Frank Fitzgerald for the governor's office. As chief executive he famously negotiated the Flint Sit-down Strike. Upon losing his reelection bid to Fitzgerald in 1938 he turned his attention to Washington, where he would serve as U.S. Attorney General for one year. On January 18, 1940, FDR nominated Murphy to the U.S. Supreme Court, where he would serve until his death in 1949.

The Story of REO Joe: Work, Kin, and Community in Autotown, U.S.A.

*Thursday, April 20, 2017 - 7:00 p.m.
Downtown CADL - 401 S. Capitol Ave.*

MSU Professor Lisa Fine will take us back to the golden days of Lansing's auto manufacturing with a look at the men who labored for the REO in the mid-20th century. More information on this program will be coming soon in the April newsletter, and at www.lansinghistory.org.



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:

- \$25 Individual Membership
- \$35 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.*