



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

April 2017

Upcoming Events

Labor Rises Up in Lansing: The 1937 Labor Holiday and Its Wider State and National Context*

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

Join Professors Lisa Fine and John Beck as they discuss the 1937 Lansing Labor Holiday, a city-wide general strike on June 7, 1937. Only a few days earlier, on May 21, workers at the Capital City Wrecking Company struck. On June 1 an Ingham County judge granted an injunction, which strikers largely ignored. In response the local Ingham County Sheriff arrested the wife of strike leader Lester Washburn in the middle of the night. Her husband, who was out of town, returned later in the morning to find his children at home alone and his wife in jail. In response to this event, local union leaders called for a general strike, which ended up involving several thousand people, including so-called "flying squadrons," union picketers who traveled from strike to strike. The city was virtually shut down as cars were parked across major streets and stores closed.

Beck and Fine will discuss the Labor Holiday, and look at its broader state and national context and significance. This program is part of a series of events highlighting the year 1937.

**This program was originally advertised as REO Joe in the March newsletter.*

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

*Saturday, April 22, 2017 - 1:30 p.m.
Lake Michigan Room - Library of Michigan- 702 W. Kalamazoo St.
(Note location change)*

Capitol Historian and HSGL Vice President 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 today remains 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 as Mayor of Detroit 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 served as U.S. Attorney General for one year. On January 18, 1940, FDR nominated Murphy to the U.S. Supreme Court, where he served until his death in 1949.

The Michigan State Police: 100 Years of History 1917-2018

*Thursday, May 4, 2017 - 7:00 p.m.
Classroom C-1, MSP Training Academy
7426 N. Canal, Dimondale*

The Michigan State Police (MSP) is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. MSP historian Phil Schertzing will describe the origins and evolution of the department over the past century. The presentation will include a number of significant connections to major cases, locations, and events in the Greater Lansing area.

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Logan Street Bridge Disaster 1929

by
Jesse Lasorda

On a cold and rainy day on April 12, 1929, one of Lansing's worst construction disasters occurred during the building of the new Logan Street Bridge on the Grand River. The bridge was being constructed by the Folwell Engineering Company of Chicago, superintended by O. E. Serbern. In order to work in the river, a cofferdam had been constructed on the south end of the bridge. It was built of enormous wooden poles and thick sheets of steel, and allowed the river water to be pumped out and the men to work below the river. The depth of the cofferdam was 25 feet below the river's surface.

After pumping water out of the cofferdam on almost a daily basis for several days, workmen noticed a leak on April 11. Adding to their problems, the Grand River was already swollen from the spring thaw and a light rain had started. That evening, boxcars being moved to one of Oldsmobile's nearby factories jumped the tracks, crashing into the newly built south piers of the bridge.

On the morning of April 12, 13 men were working in the cofferdam trying to stop the leak. Six men were in the lowest-level of the dam and others higher up, as the foreman had just sent up a number of men to retrieve more materials for the repair. Suddenly, without warning, the cofferdam gave way. It was first thought there had been an explosion, but it was the force of the swollen river that had caved in the dam. Emergency crews were summoned, with the Lansing Police Department first to arrive. A short time later the Lansing Fire Department appeared. The Oldsmobile factory lent several steam-powered cranes. Earl Ewing, a local resident and an experienced diver, offered

his expertise, but local emergency personnel deemed the cofferdam too unstable to risk a diver.

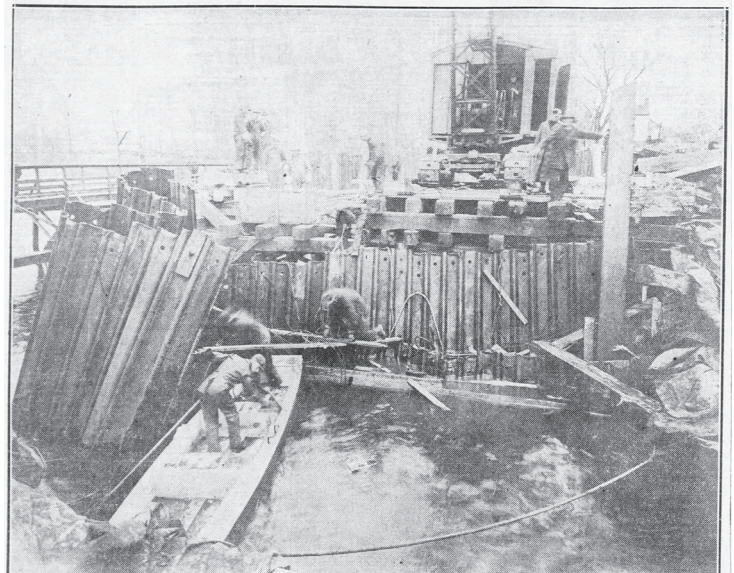
First reports from the *Lansing State Journal* indicated confusion over the numbers of workers involved and their names. The local paper also published photos of the cofferdam that gave an excellent visual account of the disaster.

The men at higher points in the cofferdam escaped injury. Two of the survivors, William Carroll, a 20-year employee and foreman for the engineering company, and Joseph Curtis, were thrown free by the blast of water and landed back on the debris. Both were taken to St. Lawrence Hospital, Carroll with serious injuries. Curtis, the only man who survived from deep in the cofferdam, provided an eye-witness account of the collapse, noting that there had been no warning of any danger.

Five men were trapped under the enormous timbers and twisted steel and lost their lives, as relief efforts proved hopeless. Too much debris lay on top of the workers, and the river water couldn't be pumped out fast enough to get to the trapped men. Recovery efforts went slowly as safety required that Forwell Engineering Co. construct a second cofferdam to reach the collapse, and progress was slowed

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Collapse of Timbers, Undermined by Increased Pressure from High Water, Wrecks Viaduct Cofferdam, Pinning Four Workmen Under Tangle of Debris



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further by difficulties with the riverbed. It took over a month before the bodies of all the deceased were recovered.

In time the newspaper was able to report more details on the workers and the men who had been lost. Most did not seem to be well known by the other workers and likely represented temporary or, essentially, day laborers. All 13 men working inside the cofferdam were African American, Hispanic or foreign born. Of the Hispanic workers, only their last names were reported: Martinez, Torres, and Salvador. In 1929 Lansing had few Hispanics living in the city.

Five workers were identified as African American: Tomas Dortch, Frank Harris, Isaac Holman, Joseph Curtis, and Tom Hays. Three African Americans lost their lives. Thomas Dortch was from Birmingham, Alabama, married, and about 23 years old. His body was not recovered until May 10. His remains were taken to Pell City, Alabama, where he was buried. It is suspected that he never received a headstone. Frank Harris, about 40 years old, was possibly from Baltimore, Maryland. His body was recovered on May 15, and he was buried in an unmarked grave in Mount Hope Cemetery in Lansing. Isaac Holman, age unknown, was probably also from Baltimore. His body was recovered May 23, and he was also buried in an unmarked grave at Mount Hope Cemetery, just a few feet from Harris.

The remaining men were William Carroll, S. Malech, Henry Kroemer, Fred Hock, Charles Myers, Ray Shellenbarger, and a man known only by his last name as Francis. Several of these men were foreign-born Americans. Fred Hock's body was recovered on May 10. He was 39 years old and married with children. He was living in Greenville, Mich., at the time of the accident and was buried at Sheridan, Mich. Henry Kroemer, 50, was born in Germany and was married with three children. His body was recovered on May 15 and was taken to Dayton, Ohio, to be buried.

The death certificates for the three African Americans were mostly blank, while the death certificates of the two non-African Americans were filled in with great detail, possibly reflecting which men had known relatives nearby as well as some degree of prejudice in the effort to find next of kin.

A Grand Jury investigation of the collapse determined that the company was not at fault and had met or exceeded standards in building the cofferdam. It was a tragic accident that took five men's lives.



Upcoming Events *Continued from page 1*

Moores River Drive 2017 Historic Home Tour A Tour to Benefit the Historical Society of Greater Lansing Generously Hosted by the Moores River Drive Neighborhood Association

Sunday, September 17, 2017

Brunch at the Country Club of Lansing

11:00 a.m. - 1:00 p.m.

Home tour 1:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.

HSGL is very excited to announce that we are partnering with the Moores River Drive Neighborhood Association to host a tour of six of Lansing's most beautiful historic homes on Moores River Drive and Cambridge Drive. More information will be coming soon on the homes to be featured. Tickets will go on sale later this spring. Tickets for the brunch will be \$25 per person, and tour tickets will be \$20 per person. All proceeds will benefit the Historical Society of Greater Lansing.

Sponsorships and advertisements for the home tour booklet are available at many different levels. A flier with more information can be found inside this edition of *The History Explorer*.



Historical Society of Greater Lansing
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Lansing, MI 48901

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