



History Explorer

Historical Society of Greater Lansing

www.LansingHistory.org

January 2019

Upcoming Events

Paving the Way – The I-496 Project

Thursday, January 24 – 7:00 p.m.

Library of Michigan, 602 West Kalamazoo

Join HSGL for a panel discussion with community members to learn more about the construction of I-496, its impact in the community, and the exciting NPS grant-funded I-496 project.

Alois Lang, Master Woodcarver

by Tim Gleisner

Wednesday, February 20 – 7:00 p.m.

Library of Michigan – 702 W. Kalamazoo

Tim Gleisner, Head of Special Collections at the Library of Michigan, will be discussing the life and work of master woodcarver Alois Lang. Lang, a native of Bavaria,

immigrated to the United States and eventually settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Here he worked for the American Seating Company and was commissioned to carve religious medieval works throughout the United States, including St. Paul's Episcopal Church here in Lansing. Discover how this master woodcarver not only changed the religious art here in Lansing, but in Michigan as a whole.

Tim Gleisner has been Head of Special Collections of the Library of Michigan for the last year. Before that he worked as Head of Special Collections at the Grand Rapids Public Library for 12 years. During that time Tim became acquainted with Alois Lang and the furniture industry in Grand Rapids and West Michigan. Tim's talk will delve into how master artists like Lang helped to create an image for the furniture industry of Michigan.

2018 In Review and a Peek at What's to Come

by Bill Castanier, HSGL President

2018 was exciting for the Historical Society of Greater Lansing (HSGL) as we sponsored programs ranging from Rock 'n' Roll postcards to how Lansing became the most unlikely location for a state capital. These programs were hosted by the Library of Michigan in their new gallery and meeting space, the Lake Erie Room.

The wonderful homeowners in the Moores River Drive neighborhood invited us in for our second annual home tour fund raiser, which moves us closer to a permanent location for a city of Lansing Museum. HSGL also sponsored its annual series of walking tours, exposing hundreds of guests to quiet neighborhoods and bustling commercial centers where they learned more about architecture, the people who lived in the homes, and the entrepreneurs who started local businesses. HSGL is now planning a fall home tour in East Lansing which will be a totally new experience.

In partnership with the Lansing Police Department, HSGL developed an extensive exhibit on their 125-year history. The exhibit first appeared at a community open house at the Lansing Center before moving to the lobby of City Hall for six months. A big thank-you goes out to Police Chief Michael Yankowski and Sgt. Justin Moore for their efforts in making this exhibit informative and inspirational.

HSGL worked closely with Downtown Lansing Inc. in creating a series of history wayfinding signs with nuggets of information celebrating the people and places of Lansing. The signs will premier this spring. With the Lansing Board of Water and Light, HSGL helped create signage for the new electrical substation at Washington Ave. and Malcom X Blvd.

During 2018 HSGL continued to build a presence

Continued on page 3

Paving The Way – The I-496 Project

by Bill Castanier

Each day tens of thousands of vehicles zip across I-496, Lansing's cross-town expressway. It's convenient, safe and easy. Like most of us, the drivers don't give a second thought about its history or the transformation the construction of I-496 had on the city and its people when it was completed in 1970. That could soon change.

The Historical Society of Greater Lansing (HSGL), in cooperation with the city of Lansing and using a National Parks Service Grant, is exploring the impact the 11.9-mile ribbon of concrete imposed on Lansing and its nearby suburbs.

During the next 18 months HSGL is telling some of that story by conducting scores of oral histories of residents; creating a web-based interactive map showing which houses were torn down and where the families moved; creating a digital portal with the Library of Michigan to host research materials; creating a scrapbook detailing the construction and its disruption; mounting a traveling exhibit that will visually tell the story; and producing a short documentary.

HSGL also will be working with the Capital Area District Library, the Library of Michigan, and the Archives of Michigan to preserve photographs, ephemera, and objects from that place and era, so they may be seen by residents and historians in another 50 years.

The research project and storytelling will detail the impact I-496 had on the desegregation of Lansing and the success the Westside neighborhood had fighting redlining and promoting open housing at a time when homes in nearby cities and suburbs were closed to minorities.

Just decades after the advent of the automobile, city planners promoted expressways as the key to renewing

overcrowded cities. New York City's indomitable city planner Robert Moses was one of the first to see expressways as one way of overcoming urban problems. Moses became the worker's hero as he built parkways to take weary workers to the nearby beaches on weekends, but when he tried to build a cross town expressway through the heart of Manhattan he came face to face with the community organizer Jane Jacobs whose efforts helped block the expressway.

Moses thought he was doing the people's bidding. The 1939 World's Fair, which was held in New York City, featured Futurama, an exhibit by General Motors that promoted the open road. GM's Futurama saw millions of visitor cueing up to watch a 16-minute dramatic presentation on what was called Magic Motorways. Over its year-long run more than 3 million visitors became acolytes for ribbons of highways leading to the future.

Although somewhat derailed World War II, the open road was stretching before us. In fact the war effort showed America how beneficial expressways could be when a stretch of highway between Detroit and the Willow Run Bomber Plant was built to supply people and the materials to build the B-25 bomber. After the war, President Eisenhower, often called the "father of the interstate system," would promote their construction as a way to quickly evacuate cities to survive a nuclear war. But more important was the federal largesse that would pay 90 percent of the construction costs for modern expressways.

Lansing, like scores of other major cities across the United States, saw expressways as the road to success. The city's 1958 Comprehensive Master Plan provided a glimpse at a cross-town expressway that would become I-496. The future had arrived. The Master Plan also predicted that Lansing's burgeoning population would surpass 250,000 by 1980.

Construction on I-496 began in 1963, and the expressway would ultimately dead-end 35 streets, create a myriad of one-way streets needed for on and off ramps, and determine future development. In the path of the proposed expressway were more than 800 homes and businesses that needed to be acquired through eminent domain, ceding the property to the state.

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I-496 would be built in eight years, becoming the first expressway to use berms in place of concrete walls. Construction problems were insignificant when compared to the major problem of relocating residents to other neighborhoods, which was further complicated by racial segregation. A vast majority of the families were African American and had lived in the St Joseph-Main Street corridor for decades. Many had relocated to Lansing to take jobs with Oldsmobile and other auto-related businesses. Around the neighborhood had grown up a network of churches, small businesses, and social clubs that catered to African Americans.

Despite its economic vitality, the area was considered disposable. A city-wide effort was organized to aid in relocation assistance, but since relocation was limited by real estate covenants, most residents were forced into apartments or small homes on the city's Southside or on the near Westside. What isn't often talked about is the destruction of social connections, friendships and relationships. By taking out the 700 block of each north/south cross street and creating dead-ends, neighborhoods were cut in half.

African Americans hastily moving into mostly all-white neighborhoods often resulted in white flight and discriminatory real estate practices. HSGL, through oral histories and records research, will shine a light on this time, but also will consider the efforts individuals, such as Westside-resident Ann Kron, undertook to fight segregation and discrimination. Kron helped found the Westside Neighborhood Association, the city's first neighborhood group, which is still an active force in neighborhood politics.

One point that needs to be underscored is that the story of the impact of I-496 must be told through the eyes of those who lived there and through their original and unique voices. That's why one of the most important features of the project is gathering those voices through audio and video interviews that can be archived for later use. An advisory committee of more than 30 community members has been selected by Mayor Andy Schor to assist in this endeavor and to provide oversight and consultation to the many volunteers who will be working on the project.

The team of Adolph Burton and Kenny Turner, lifetime residents of Lansing, have already conducted video interviews of more than a dozen residents who

experienced the dislocation first hand. Greg Eaton, Bill Letts, Wella Tarwater, Olivia Letts, Walter Baecker and others take us back more than 50 years telling poignant stories about a once vibrant neighborhood.

2018 In Review...

Continued from page 1

on Facebook, surpassing 6,000 dedicated members who post regularly. HSGL Facebook is one of the best examples of crowd sourcing of local history. We will launch a new edition of our website (lansinghistory.org) in 2019 to help tell the story of Lansing history.

The biggest news this year is the National Park Service grant awarded to HSGL and the City of Lansing to tell the story of the impact of I-496 on the city as seen through the eyes of homeowners who lost their homes. Going into 2019 we will need lots of help to do research, record oral histories, and launch both a major exhibit and traveling exhibit.

Coming this fall HSGL, the Library of Michigan, and the friends of Jim Harrison will mount an exhibit on the life and writing career of one of Lansing-area's most prominent fiction writers. Harrison, who graduated from Haslett High School and received his BA and MA from MSU, is considered one of the world's major writers. During his career he wrote more than 60 books. His best known, *Legends of the Fall*, was made into a movie starring Brad Pitt. The exhibit will showcase a series of photographs taken by Bud Schulz of St. Johns and will include personal items such as his writing desk, examples of his writing, and other artifacts from his life.

I'm often asked, Why does all this matter? It's easy to repeat the cliché "history repeats itself" or Faulkner's classic take "the past isn't dead; it's not even past," but a recent editorial in the *New York Times* on the discovery of a lost city said this about the past: "For each of us to look at what came before is important for many of the same reasons that art, literature and history are important. They open our minds; they lead us to reflect, to better understand ourselves and our world."

My personal thanks go out to the highly engaged trustees of HSGL, the scores of volunteers who help make our mission resonate in the community, and our members and the local media who find what we do interesting.



Historical Society of Greater Lansing
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Historical Society of Greater Lansing, P.O. Box 12095 Lansing MI 48901

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in the Historical Society of Greater Lansing

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