



The Crow's Nest

NEWSLETTER OF THE FERNDALE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Winter 2012

PERCEPTIONS OF FERNDALE: BOG, BOOM T, FASHIONABLE, AND FABULOUS

Jean Spang

Silence is not usually associated with modern Ferndale. But early settlers' first-hand recollections of local history, available in Historical Society archives, often mention silence as an elemental characteristic of the region. As late as the early 1930s, it was possible, when weather conditions were right, to hear boat whistles on the Detroit River and the roar of lions at the Zoo. At night especially, residents would note any break in the profound quiet: a lone car in the far distance, or the mournful whistle of a steam locomotive. Accounts of such sounds—or sights, smells, and even emotional responses—define local history in ways that maps, photos, and measurable facts cannot, and reveal that not so long ago Ferndale was still viewed by many as “frontier” territory.



Southeast section of Ferndale just east of railroad at 8 Mile,
1910 to 1915
Photo: Mrs. Leonard Schnell

What is now Ferndale was designated as “Marsh” on the famous Bela Hubbard map of 1822. Subsequent first-hand descriptions of the area, by early settlers and visitors alike, emphasize “bog,” “swamp,” and “impassable”—all images that Ferndale retained well into the 1940s. Yet beginning in the earliest 1900s, descriptions also characterized the region as a new “wild west,” enchanting in its challenges in spite of treacherous trails, sand burrs, smells from smoldering peat bogs, and lingering fog and soot. Duly noted in first-hand recollections is the rugged beauty of the untamed landscape: ferns, thick woods, wild flowers, morel mushrooms, birds, wild game, fireflies, and pollywogs.

By 1908, the “bog” had become prime property as the promise of work at the nearby Highland Park Ford plant attracted newcomers. In an almost 4-square-mile area, from Eight Mile to near Ten Mile, land developers created subdivisions and basic street patterns on both sides of Woodward. New residents recounted their travails in detail: dealing with quicksand, navigating the area in a rowboat, trusting a Woodward streetcar whose rails ran on sand, maintaining a vegetable garden in sandy soil, nurturing unruly chickens, and temporarily living in a tent or hastily-built garage. Outhouses and bathing in a tin wash tub were givens. But the consensus was that the challenges of everyday life in such a primal setting unexpectedly and quickly promoted a strong sense of cooperation among neighbors—which resulted in the establishment of local schools, churches, and service clubs as vital centers for a soon-to-be viable “community.” Meanwhile, for years to come, the terrain was to remain ideal for “sports” such as swinging on overhead tree limbs all the way down LaPrairie from Marshall to Eight Mile, and tree-sitting contests to determine who could remain aloft the longest (record: 700 hours). Skating ponds and “swimmin’ holes” were readily available.



Flood, Ferndale/Hazel Park Border, 1947
Photo: Daily Tribune

Taming the terrain, and refining the area’s “dismal swamp” image, was a priority for the officers of the new Village of Ferndale, incorporated in 1917. For one amazed resident, long accustomed to opaque nights, the evening that electric lights were first turned on in the village was like suddenly seeing a “fairyland.” By the time Ferndale was incorporated as a City in 1927, water and sewer lines had been installed; some side streets had been paved or at least cindered; business and home building promoted beyond all expectations; the Nine Mile/Woodward intersection had become the town center, and main-line churches were attracting congregations. Drainage remained a problem.

Even though “only a horse could get around town easily” because of the muddy streets and annual floods, the opening of Lincoln High School and the Ferndale Theater, both in 1921, were considered major events of the decade. In addition, two landmark restaurants opened on Woodward: The Rialto (with only an icebox for refrigeration), in 1926; and Rodger’s Dutch Mill in 1928. In 1928 Ferndale got its own special symbol: the car with the wobbly tires at Wetmore’s garage on Woodward. Watching the animals being moved into the Zoo in big crates (even the elephant), in 1928, was major entertainment. *(Continued Page 2)*

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Residents recall that they lived a “simple” and “blue collar” life in the 1920s. But they also reflect that social issues became more apparent: The KKK, which had appeared locally in the late ‘teens, burned crosses near homes belonging to Southerners (regardless of race), mostly on the town’s east side. Gypsies sometimes camped in Bailey’s woods (present site Wilson School), which raised suspicions. And rumors about the Purple Gang began. For some residents, the opening of the Ferndale Theater was a source of some controversy, as was the open-air dance floor that appeared on Woodward between Academy and Ardmore. Had sin arrived?

By 1930, Ferndale seemed poised to continue many advances of the 1920s, but the Depression intervened. Ferndale’s terrain still presented obstacles, but people dealt with more pressing challenges: obtaining and offering services by barter; collecting items for sale; sharing necessities with family and friends; digging ditches to sewers when floods appeared. Even vacant lots were mined for cash ventures: The sand from the present site of Ferndale High School was sold to the Ford Rouge Plant glass factory (how to fill up the resulting hole became a problem when the new high school was built in the mid-1950s). Residents also joined together to build the “Castle on the Nine” (with bricks from the demolished Detroit Post Office on Fort St. in Detroit) so young people would have a place to gather. Laughing always helped, too. One example: The Detroit Street Railways earned the nickname “Damn Silly Rates,” because of its 5-percent charge for a streetcar ticket. Then, in 1937, the Radio City Theater and the Federal Department Store opened in the same block at Woodward/Nine, signifying a thriving business district. Ferndale had survived the Depression intact.



Streetcar on Woodward, 1930's
Machpelah Cemetery on Right
Photo: Museum Archives

First-hand accounts emphasize that the community cohesiveness of the Depression years was a source of pride for all residents, and prepared Ferndale for the traumas of the 1940s. The east side of the city soon became an integral part of the Arsenal of Democracy because of its many manufacturing plants which produced vital airplane and armaments parts. The U.S. Navy presented the highest honor to Approved Manufacturing Company for the invention and production of a gun part that was responsible for the Allies’ strategic victory against the Japanese in the Battle of the Coral Sea, 1942. On the west side of town, Ethyl Corporation produced various resins used in armament production. Local war bond drives earned special commendations from the federal government, and Victory Gardens were common throughout the city.



9 Mile near Allen looking East, 1950's
Photo: Bob Thomas

Ferndale’s east side was to retain its special role in World War II even after the war ended: For a time, German prisoners of war were held in Harding Park, which became known as “The Encampment.” Meanwhile the east side was the focus of a “Boom T” (boom town) building effort, extending the northeast of Nine Mile from Hilton to the city limits. Meanwhile Reichhold Chemical Company which had opened in 1927, was presenting Ferndale residents with new smells, various explosions, and a number of fires.

Viewed from the vantage point of the 1980s, longtime residents concluded that the post-war era was to change Ferndale forever. Initially, the Nine Mile/Woodward intersection thrived as never before, cars became a status symbol, and the “good life” abounded. But 1954 proved to be a turning point for the city: The opening of Northland Center, the flagship mall in nearby Southfield, meant that main-street towns such as Ferndale would no longer be a shopper’s first choice. According to one councilman, expansion of the parking lot on Withington helped sustain local business for a time. By the 1960s, Ferndale was known for its specialty shops, earning the “Fashionable Ferndale” title. Residents, however, began to perceive a loss of “community,” and Nine Mile gradually ceased to thrive as a business street. In 1979 the Radio City and Federal’s, mainstays of former Ferndale, had been demolished. Local manufacturing was at low ebb. Ferndale became mainly a residential community with no frills. Ultimately, however, the city’s business area was to be revived in the later 1980s by the opening of new restaurants, bars, and an inspired nightlife, earning the city’s current title of “Fabulous Ferndale.”

Today the “dismal swamp” is gone. No horses are needed in town, sand burrs are rare, and local floods are few. But something to contemplate: One older resident in 1987, reflecting on the challenging days of Ferndale’s early development, wistfully concluded: “We were in heaven and didn’t know it.”

Sources consulted: Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, and Gerry Kulick (ed.), Old Timers Tell It Like It Was (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987), passim, and specific topics and contributors to this volume: community, Ritter and Coyne; Depression, Nicholson; electric lights, Leach; everyday life, Vanderlist, Avery; Gypsies, Muller, Damon, Mielke; heaven, Mahan; horse, Lazenby; living conditions, Coluccio, Richardson, Kotlarek, Steger, Beteley, Mills, Irwin; Northland Center, O'Donnell; Purple Gang, Tomsett, Elmers; Rialto, Kelingos; Reichhold Co., Kowalec; silence, Muller, Stephens, Kowalec; street cars, Miller; trains, Kowalec; tree swinging/sitting, Mills; World War II, Bonner; West, Damon; Zoo, Liskow. Maurice Cole, Ferndale of Yesteryear (Ferndale Historical Society, 1971), passim. Kenan Joseph Heise, Aunt Ella Stories (Chicago: Academy Chicago Publishers, 1985), passim, and specific topics: silence, DSR, Ferndale Theater. W.T. Miller, “First Gateway of Southern Oakland County,” Manuscript copy of article printed in the Ferndale Enterprise, 1934, in Historical Society archives, passim, and specific topic: dismal swamp references. Roy F. Goodspeed, My Forty Years Plus with the City of Ferndale, 1925-1966 (Privately printed, 1983), passim, and specific topic: infrastructure history. “Early Local Nicknames,” typescript manuscript, unattributed, undated, in Historical Society archives.

PROFILE: STUDENTS, LINCOLN HIGH SCHOOL, JANUARY 1931*

Rogues' Gallery

<u>Name</u>	<u>Ambition</u>	<u>Favorite Saying</u>
Evelyn Baltes	To be quiet	Palooka
Richard Bullock	A successful bootlegger	Oh! Gosh
Ryder Claflin	To be a sailor	Don't get tough
John Diggan	To be a gangster	FOWE
Alice Finch	Ziegfeld Follies	You do this!
Louise Hall	To become beautiful	Oh! My college friend
Ruth Leake	To be a farmer's wife	Mike
Oliver Loomis	To be the ideal one	Oh! Rats
Jane McClellan	To be somebody	Oh! Was I ever thrilled
Lewis Monroe	President of U.S.A.	Is my mother in there?
Dorothy Parent	To live on Hanover	All right
Helen Ruppert	To be a man hater	What! Oh!
Geraldine Thompson	To be the usher's wife	How does my hair look?
Douglas Walker	To conquer Helen	Can I drive you home? Who?
Ada Williams	To be Mrs. Monroe	Oh! Cats
Winifred Wheeler	To be somebody's stenog	Oh! Yeah!
Roberta McLaughlin	To live in Indiana	Am I in love!
Edward Miller	To be a barker	Ruppie
Adaline Maday	To establish a Friedrich Home	Oh! My Dear!
Jack Christopher	To get Dot back	What! What!
Doris Richards	To find her dream man	Row-dee-dow
Lyle Fowler	To have a Harem	Oh! Heck!
Francis Williams	To catch a man	Ya! Ought to see him
Bernice Schnell	To be Mrs. Diggan	Gee! Kid!
Eric Ryan	To be another Paderewski	Raise ya ten
Betty Beach	To run a beauty shoppe	My brother



**As listed in the Lincoln High School yearbook, The President, January 1931, p. 52*

FERNDALE FIRST-HAND*

1923 *As a little girl, I can remember that my reaction as we drove through Ferndale was "Yuk, I wouldn't live here."*

Jeanne (Giddey) Miller

1930s *The largely un-built Liggett Farms subdivision, on the high sandy west side, was an outdoor paradise. The land was in transition from farm to city. We had huge oak trees to climb, wild strawberries to pick, enough snow in the winter for a little sledding, fields of brush and trees to play cops and robbers on, lots of schoolmates to play with nearby, space to lay out our own sandlot ball diamonds and football fields.*

"Dick" Haggerty

1940s *When the War came! 1941. We all joined the War effort. We saved and washed our cans and took them to collection depots. There was a freeze on prices—shoes, meat, butter, gas, sugar were rationed. People would stand in line at the State Packing House Market when those items could be bought without a coupon. Yes, we had ration coupons, one for each member of the family—in a book.*

Betty Kelingos

*Source: Ruth Rodgers Elmers, June Waugh Kotlarek, and Gerry Kulick (ed.), *Old Timers Tell It Like It Was*, (Ferndale Historical Society, 1987): 31, 61, 138, 171, 193.

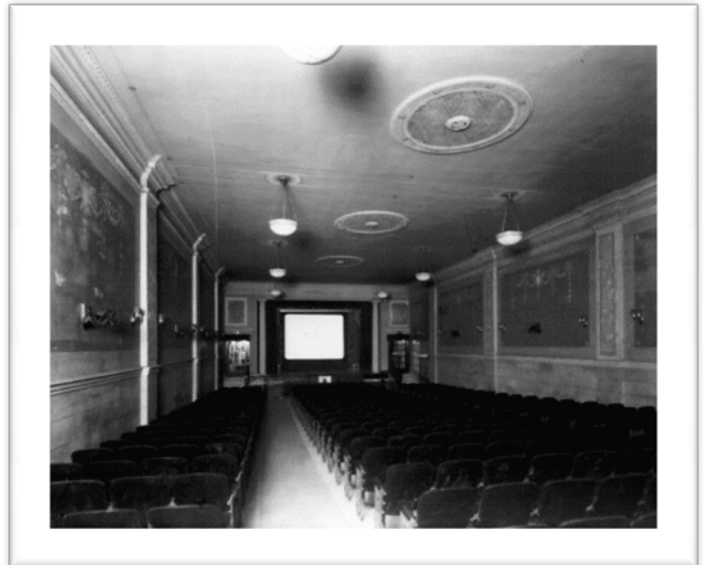
Ferndale Theater



Exterior, Ferndale Theater, 22930 Woodward.

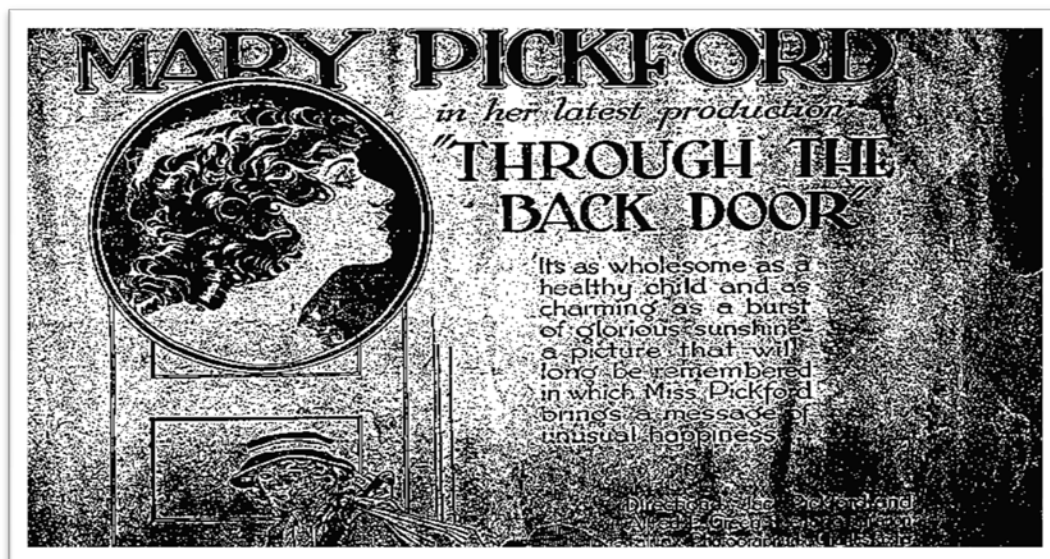
Opened in 1921. Fred Rowley was the owner. His wife played the organ accompaniment to early films. The organ was later donated to St. Luke’s Episcopal Church, 2211 Livernois. In 1931 Thomas J. Ealand became the Ferndale Theater owner, promising to show “modern films.”

Photo: Museum Resource Collection



Interior, Ferndale Theater. The Ferndale became the Studio North in the 1960s; later the present Magic Bag.

Photo: Museum Resource Collection

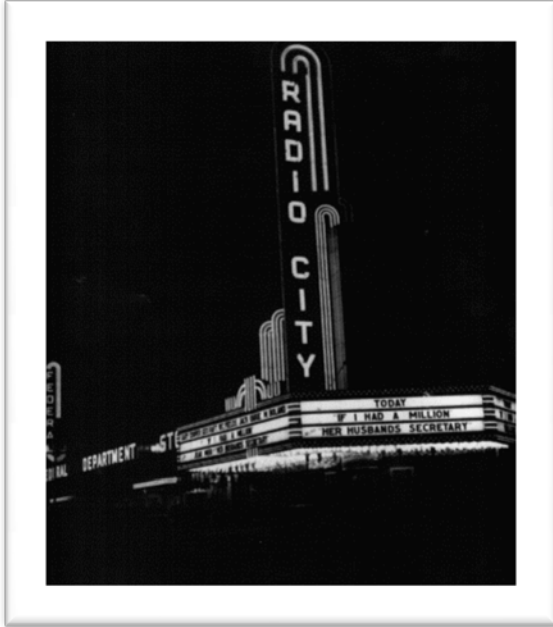


Advertisement in the *Ferndale Star*, September 1921, for the first movie shown at the Ferndale Theater

Photo: Museum Resource Collection

to the Show”

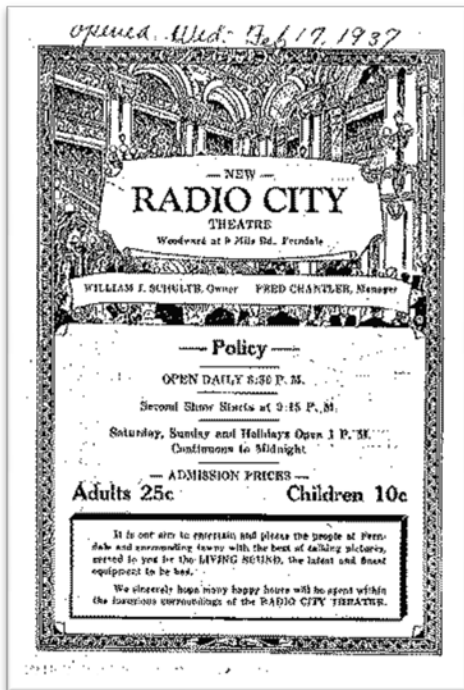
Radio City Theater



Exterior, Radio City Theater,
22857 Woodward. Opened in 1936.
Wm. J. Schulte was the owner.
Photo: Ernest Weston, ca 1943



Interior, Radio City Theater, Seated 1,485
Christmas Kids Show, ca 1947
Photo: Jack Richards



Program, Radio City Opening Night, February 17, 1937

OLDEST HOUSES IN FERNDALE

As part of the ongoing Wayfinding Project, a program of the Ferndale Downtown Development Authority that documents the oldest structures in the city, the following houses have received a plaque designating the year built from the City.

<u>Street</u>	<u>Number</u>	<u>Year</u>
Albany	349	1914
Albany	371	1925
Albany	541	1924
Albany	705	1926
Ardmore	465	1920
Chesterfield, E.	505	1903
Dover	1700	1927
Drayton, W.	564	1926
Drayton, W.	990	1925
Hazelhurst, E.	457	1928
Hazelhurst, W.	1416	1934
Hyland	2535	1929
Kensington	250	1901
LaPrairie	664	1924
Leroy	720	1917
Leroy	1014	1928
Leroy	1030	1924
Maplehurst, W.	415	1927
Maplehurst, W.	476	1926
Maplehurst, W.	506	1916
Maplehurst, W.	603	1930
Maplehurst, W.	630	1923
Marshfield	908	1932
Minerva	3326	1910
Oakridge, W.	331	1920
Oakridge, W.	371	1920
Oakridge, W.	575	1925
Oakridge, W.	742	1929
Pinecrest	1345	1927
Pinecrest	1440	1923
Pinecrest	1524	1927
Pinecrest	1531	1920
Pinecrest	1534	1928
Pinecrest	1542	1926
Pinecrest	1906	1926
St. Louis	310	1922
St. Louis	352	1926
Saratoga, E.	234	1922
Saratoga, E.	430	1927
Saratoga, E.	517	1910
Saratoga, W.	376	1915
Saratoga, W.	576	1925
Saratoga, W.	587	1924
Saratoga, W.	1375	1930
Silman	436	1920
Troy, W.	348	1924
Withington	226	1928
Withington	704	1926
Woodland, W.	215	1929
Woodland, W.	254	1928
Woodland, W.	630	1921



250 Kensington, Built 1901

Photo: Museum Housing Resource Collection



505 E. Chesterfield, Built 1903

Photo: Museum Housing Resource Collection



704 Withington, Built 1926

Photo: Museum Housing Resource Collection

From our Vice President/Director

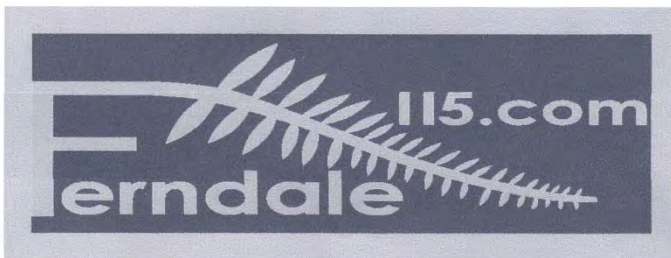
Dear Friends and Fellow Members:

It is my sincere hope that you all had a memorable Holiday Season. There have been a few changes since our last publication.

I am happy to say that our Ferndale Gazette Project (the digitization of the Gazette, 1921-1979) is finally complete. It has added a great and valuable resource to the Museum's reference material. Our photo project continues to move forward, and many changes within the Museum itself have taken place. All to make your experience with us more enjoyable and help us to better attend to your historical research needs.

During our annual Board elections we elected a few new faces to the Board of Directors. The new Board roster is as follows: President: **Roger Schmidt**; Vice President/Museum Director/Historian/Treasurer: **Garry Andrews**; Research Specialist/Historian/Executive and Corresponding Secretary: **Jean Spang**; Recording Secretary: **Mary Shapiro**; Membership Chair: **Lynne Prudden**; Board Members: **David Lungu, Lisa Harteau, Gay Tarvis and Chris Hammer**; Trustee: **Dan Harteau**. On behalf of the Board of Directors and myself I would like to thank the outgoing Board members for their dedication and support. A special thank-you goes out to **Frank Flores and Phyllis Hill** for all of their time and commitment dedicated to the Ferndale Historical Society since its inception in the mid 1980's. It is our wish that you, our membership, enjoy a healthy, safe and prosperous 2012.

Regards and Onward,
Garry Andrews



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Operators of the Ferndale Historical Museum

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Calendar of Events:

- Thursday, January 26, 2012 6 pm Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome
- Thursday, February 23, 2012 6 pm Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome
- Thursday, March 22, 2012 6 pm Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome
- Thursday, April 26, 2012 6 pm Board Meeting, Historical Society, held at the Museum, public is welcome

The Crow’s Nest, Winter 2012

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“Preserving the Heritage of Ferndale for Future Generations”