

# The Dearborn Historian

Quarterly of the Dearborn Historical Museum  
Autumn 2019 Volume 56, Number 3



## To Common Ground

The History of Flight Finds a Home in Dearborn

**Also in this issue:** Remembering an historic march, taking a joy ride on a tractor and more.

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## The Ford Homes: Assembling a Neighborhood

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This book originally began as a visual presentation of the exteriors of homes. However, as the author continued the process of putting this together, he found that the outside only showed part of the story. People are the other necessary ingredient in a book celebrating the centenary of this area's existence. Not only was it appropriate to include pictures of families but it was also necessary to tell some stories of the homes and the people who live here and have lived here.

Receive a discount of \$25 per book when ordering 5 or more books.

## Before Fair Lane

\$30.00

Dearborn is enriched by a history of its people and the homes in which they have lived. Our most notable resident, Henry Ford, had a castle he named Fair Lane, which provides the reference point in the title of this book. While the rest of the city's populace did not approach the wealth of our homegrown automotive magnate, many of them had delightful homes in which they took respite not only in Henry Ford's day but also in the years preceding him. Some of the homes featured in this book are masterpieces of design. Others are humble, but each remains for its inhabitants a place of shelter and comfort.

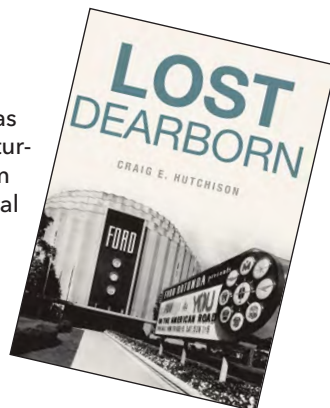


This book is meant to preserve images of homes that exist today but might in the future be torn down for new homes. This book is also meant to provide reminders of those homes that are long gone but reflect a sense of "Old Dearborn." There are some stories as well.

## Lost Dearborn

\$22.00

Throughout its existence, Dearborn has been a pioneer settlement, a multicultural hub, a college town, a major tourism center and a world-renowned industrial city. Unfortunately, due to a variety of factors, significant structures have been lost to time. Almost all of the eleven U.S. Arsenal complex buildings have disappeared since the arsenal was closed in 1875. The hall-

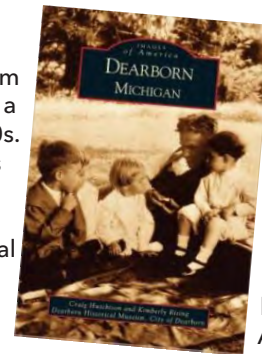


ways of the Edison School and Oxford School still live on in the hearts of their students but were razed long ago. Even beloved edifices such as the Ford Rotunda and the Ford Motor Company Administration building, built by Dearborn's favorite son, Henry Ford, are now only a memory. Author Craig E. Hutchison endeavors to immortalize the important foundational building blocks of an evolving city.

## Dearborn, Michigan A History of the Area and the People

\$21.99

Located on the banks of the Rouge River just ten miles from Dearborn began as a settlement in the 1780s. Over the course of two centuries, it has developed into a close-knit community, a major tourism world-famous industrial town, a major tourism center, and a city. Through an impressive collection of photographs drawn from the Dearborn Historical Museum, Images of Dearborn, Michigan documents the history of the area and the people who have shaped Dearborn's rich history. This book traces Dearborn's spirit of innovation through engaging glimpses of the 19th century U.S. Arsenal, the historic River Rouge Plant, Mayor Hubbard's lasting influence, and the legacy of Henry Ford. From the European settlers who first settled on the banks of the Rouge, to the streets, buildings, and schools that were named for them, Dearborn is revealed as a vibrant urban community with a strong sense of civic pride.



of the Rouge River just ten miles from Detroit, the city's humble pioneer Over the course of two centuries, it has developed into a college center, and a city. Through an of photographs born Historical America: Dear-influential people, places, and events that have shaped Dearborn's rich history.

## The Bark Covered House

\$7.95

A graphic and thrilling description of real pioneer life in the wilderness of Michigan. Written by William Nowlin, one of the pioneers who came to the area with his family from the Hudson Valley in 1834. The struggles and hardships of life in the woods, noted by isolation and the need to be self-sufficient, are colorfully portrayed.



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Flight of Fame  
Images Courtesy of Dearborn Historical Museum

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Hunger March  
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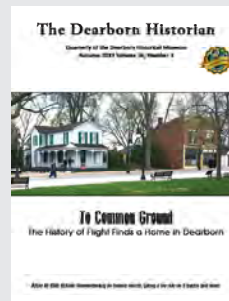
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### ON THE COVER: The Wright Brothers



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# Greetings from the Editor

**Craig Hutchison**

Well, here we go again. I hope you have found the topics covered in the last few issues interesting and enriching. This issue came together in an eye-opening way for myself and almost had a life of its own. In the end, I was very pleased with the finished product and with the array of topics and the depth of historical information that appears here.

One thing this position has afforded me is the chance to connect with those who have a rich heritage and deep roots in the area. Joe Dulmage, whose family has been in the Dearborn area for generations, relates a story I think you will find quite amusing. There is no reason that history cannot be fun and in fact, I believe that oftentimes true events are more amusing than fiction.

The series "Discovering Dearborn's Hidden History" returns to investigate an event that may surprise you. This article is the perfect example of why researching and writing about historical topics excites me so much. There are events and people connected to those events who deserve to be remembered in the interests of telling the story of change as it relates to our area's history. That is my goal with this series and with this publication.

Henry Ford and all that he did during his lifetime has been debated and discussed by many different commentators as well as the general public. That is certainly healthy and they are discussions we should have. It cannot be denied, however, that Dearborn is on the world map because of Henry Ford. The company he started over a century ago is today a global entity and Dearborn is a world-famous industrial center because of it. In addition, the historical complex he began, originally dubbed The Edison Institute, has grown and today the complex is visited by

nearly 2 million people annually. This institution also keeps Dearborn in the public eye. It tells the story of over 300 years of history and some of the objects and stories are related to world changing history. I thought it might be interesting to find out how this came to be. With that in mind, read about how the Wright Brothers Cycle Shop and Wright Brothers Home came to reside in Dearborn.

The Dearborn Historical Museum is doing great work in the arena of restoration. Collections Manager Matthew Graff returns with his series "From the Collections" to cover a fascinating artifact which had almost been lost to history itself. In addition, Glenn O'Kray sheds light on the Ford Hunger March of 1932 revealing many aspects you may have never read before.

Please consider the Dearborn Historical Museum as a place to volunteer. We have many opportunities and we are very flexible in terms of scheduling. We have recently added a section on our website which introduces the various opportunities we have. Please check it out when you have a chance.

As always, I encourage you to email me at my address below with feedback. Visit [thedhm.com](http://thedhm.com) for more information on upcoming events and Museum happenings. If you have any questions or ideas about topics that you would like to see covered, please feel free to email me at [craighutchison@gmail.com](mailto:craighutchison@gmail.com).

Happy Reading,  
Craig Hutchison  
Managing Editor  
The Dearborn Historian

## MUSEUM GUILD OF DEARBORN ENDOWMENT FUND INFORMATION

All donations are tax-deductible.

Gifts can be made in cash, checks, stocks, bonds and other assets, as well as by a will. Checks should be payable to the Museum Guild of Dearborn, noting the Endowment on the memo line.

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Museum Guild of Dearborn  
2612 Burns Street  
Dearborn, MI 48124

For more information, contact the Museum Guild of Dearborn at (313) 363-3560.

If you would like to help us ensure the future of the Dearborn Historical Museum and its programs through a donation to the Museum Guild of Dearborn Endowment, please complete this form and return it to the Museum Guild:

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# TO COMMON GROUND

## A RELOCATION TO GREENFIELD VILLAGE OF THE WRIGHT BROTHERS HOME AND CYCLE SHOP.

by Kirk A. Haas

*Editor's Note: Kirk A. Haas is a Wright Scholar and author of The Wright Words: Inspirational Stories from the lives of Orville and Wilbur Wright available online only through Amazon Books. Haas is a Master Historical Presenter of the Wright buildings in Greenfield Village.*

The first human to be lifted successfully in flight on a gliding machine was in 1853 when a ten-year-old boy stepped onto a glider built by Sir George Cayley of England. It is altogether fitting then that the first person to fly on a Wright Brothers glider was also a ten-year-old boy, Tom Tate, who helped the Wright brothers test their first glider during their visit, in 1900, to Kitty Hawk, North Carolina. Today, man can fly through the air because of these two brothers from Dayton, Ohio, and their dedication to solving the problem of human flight. Wilbur and Orville Wright invented and built the first heavier than air flying machine in their shop in Dayton, Ohio.

On July 2, 1936, the Wright Cycle Shop, in Dayton, Ohio, where the first airplane was conceived and invented,

was purchased by The Edison Institute for the purpose of removal to an outdoor museum in Dearborn, Michigan, called Greenfield Village - an eighty-acre plot of land dedicated to the preservation of iconic historic buildings connected to some of America's greatest innovators and inventors covering 300 years of American history.

The work of the Wrights and their successful first flight in December 1903 is retold daily in the building where they made their gliders and the first airplane. The Wright Cycle Company building, removed from its original location at 1127 W. Third Street in Dayton Ohio, now stands in Henry Ford's Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan.

How did the Wright Cycle Co. workshop, the birthplace of aviation, and the Wright home, birthplace of Orville Wright, end up in Dearborn at Henry Ford's outdoor museum?

The story of the removal of both the cycle shop and the Wright family home begins in December of 1934 with an



Wright Home & Cycle Shop in Greenfield Village as seen today. (author's collection)

WEATHER: ALWAYS FAIR AND VELOCITY UNLIMITED

MUSEUM EDITION

CHIRP

Inauguration Collection - EB file

JUNE, 1936

DEARBORN, MICH.

# Ford Offers EB Exhibit A Home

## History Is Kept Alive In Institute

Edison Museum Serves Educational Purpose

At Dearborn, Michigan, just a few miles west of Detroit, is Greenfield Village, created by Henry Ford for the preservation of the handcraft arts of our ancestors and of representative early American buildings in their original state and, where possible, with their original furnishings.

Here is located the courthouse in which Abraham Lincoln practiced law. Here is the little factory in which Charles Stimpson and Father Burdick pioneered the problems of electricity and household use. The memorial to Stephen F. Austin, the log cabin in which William Blaine McClellan, educator, was born. Here also are housed a dozen structures associated with the memory of Thomas A. Edison, including the building with their complete equipment in which, during the most fruitful decade of his life, he labored at Menlo Park, New Jersey, and at Fort Myers, Florida. Here, too, is a silent stage in which milking, bookbinding, reading, weaving, bookmaking, glass blowing, and other crafts of a hundred years ago are enacted today by students in the village. The village green is surrounded by the Inn and Post Office, school and Chapel, Town Hall and general Store.

The implements and products of agriculture, manufacturing, and transportation form the bulk of some 8,000 objects that are in the collection, one of which will be the early Bird collection, gradually taking shape in the Edison Institute Museum, which adjoins Greenfield Village. This museum is essentially an educational project. All eight units are roofed, the museum is a series of buildings connected by arcades and corridors, architectural reproductions of historic American buildings, with "Independence" as the central unit and "The Old City Hall" and the "Old City Hall" Philadelphia flanking it. At the right is the Main Exhibition Building, eight-stories high. Here is illustrated the story of the use of development and machinery, the progress of manufacturing, and the development of transportation.

**Welcome, Early Birds**

*By Edsel Ford*

The need of a plan to preserve the vehicles, trophies and early records of men who had a vital part in the development of American aviation has been brought to our attention by William E. Scripps, President of the Early Birds' Association. Members of the Early Birds' Association were among aviation's first students and inventors. Investigation shows that many of their early plans, engines and other handwork are still in existence, but they are scattered and decaying in remote places, unattended and unrecognized.

Continued on page 2

## 67 Dailies Enlisted In Big Project

Edison Institute Will House Archives

This edition is published with the thought of fulfilling a definite mission. First, to acquire all Early Birds' throughout the world, our best fortune in having a permanent location tendered to us of which every member can be extremely proud. The Edison Institute Museum will ultimately be one of the outstanding aviation exhibits of the world.

Second, to give sixty-seven of our leading newspapers that are graciously co-operating with us, a comprehensive idea of our state in this project and at the same time publicly witness to them our sincere thanks for their assistance.

Third, to result in action now by bringing our members in contact with these newspapers. Members please get busy with preparation of your biographies.

Since the National Air Races were held in Dearborn, Michigan, September 4-7, the next regular meeting of the Early Birds will be held there. Plans are now under way to hold an informal meeting at Dearborn some time during the Fall. Definite plans for the Dearborn gathering will be made later.

**KITTY HAWK PILGRIMAGE**

Let us forget, at our next meeting a committee will be appointed to take care of details in connection with our annual pilgrimage to Kitty Hawk. On December 15, 1935, we will have been just 23 years since we were than air power-driven machines became a fact, and the Age of Aviation really began.

Very shortly the first gift from an Early Bird will be in our exhibit room. Our president, William E. Scripps, is the donor and it is an Edward-cyclic aero engine. Many we recall these engines. Art. Smith learned to fly with one of them, 1911. More details later, but I Museum Committee wish to thank our president.

Continued on page 2

**Chirp, Early Birds magazine, June 1936 edition announcing a home for their collection. [credit: From the Collections of The Henry Ford]**

internal letter sent to Ford executive and Greenfield Village Director, Fred Black. This letter indicated that both the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia and the Smithsonian National Museum in Washington DC, were actively pursuing the Wright Brothers first airplane. They wanted the 1903 flyer for permanent display in their museums. Henry Ford also felt the first airplane would make an incredible addition to The Edison Institute, as The Henry Ford was called in the early decades of the museum's existence.

Although Henry Ford did not get the first airplane, The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation now has two fully functional replicas of the Flyer which can be seen today in the ticket lobby and in the museum exhibit, Heroes of the Sky.

**Early Birds**

About the same time Henry Ford began construction of The Edison Institute, a small group of pilots who had flown prior to the beginning of the Great War formed an organization to honor their fellow men and women pilots. Their mission

was to preserve the relics and stories of all who had flown solo before WWI—before flying became a job. This group called themselves the Early Birds; the pioneers of aviation. The Wright Brothers were honorary members of this organization.

At the end of 1934, the leadership of the Early Birds changed, and the new President of the organization realized the Early Birds was on a collision course with time. He understood that the membership of the Early Birds would eventually, literally, die out as the limited number of pre-1916 pilots aged.

The Early Birds collection of artifacts of the early years of flight was of immense value to the world and future generations and the Early Bird leaders thought their collection of artifacts, airplanes and documents, along with the treasure trove of biographies of these early flyers, needed a permanent home to protect the relevance of their pioneering accomplishments.

The newly elected President of the Early Birds was William E. Scripps. Scripps was the Senior Editor of The Detroit News, and his idea was to find a home for these artifacts by placing the entire Early Birds collection at The Edison Institute in Dearborn, Michigan. Wm. Scripps and the Early Birds' pursuit of a home for their collection launched "the movement to restore on common ground, the Wright home and workshop" in Greenfield Village next to the shrines of Edison, Webster, and Ford.<sup>1</sup>

By "common ground," it was meant that Greenfield Village was a place open to the world to visit, and the Wright buildings would be in a place where they would be hon-ored and their historic sites visited by the citizens of the world. To this end, Scripps contacted Edsel Ford, CEO of Ford Motor Co. and President of the Ford Aeroplane Company, with his idea of moving the entire Early Bird collection and the workshop to The Edison Institute. Edsel liked the idea of acquiring the Early Birds' collection and asked Scripps to bring the idea up the next time Scripps and Ford were in town. Edsel arranged a meeting between Henry Ford, Scripps, and the Chairman of the museum, Fred Hoover.

Scripps recalled this meeting to discuss the Early Birds' contribution to the Ford collection in Dearborn, quoting Henry Ford as saying to Edsel, that the museum was "primarily a transportation museum. Why the dickens didn't we think about airplanes? We used to build them."<sup>2</sup>

The Edison Institute quickly accepted the Early Birds collection and continued to build on that collection by adding planes and artifacts throughout the years.

The exhibit in The Henry Ford Museum of American Innovation called Heroes of the Sky began with the depositing

of a large portion of the Early Birds collection in the mid 1930's. It was the Early Birds' efforts and persistence with both Henry and Edsel Ford that led to the museums ability to continue to honor those early pilots still today, eighty years later.

## *A Talk with Orville*

During this meeting with the Fords, Scripps and Hoover mentioned the possibility of acquiring the workshop where the plane was made. It is the one artifact in aviation history, they felt, that could represent four years of scientific research resulting in the invention of the airplane. It is the 'birth-place' of aviation. Henry and Edsel were receptive to this idea.

Scripps now had an opening to approach Orville Wright, in hopes that he could convince Orville to deposit the first airplane, clearly the most important aviation artifact, in The Edison Institute in Dearborn, Michigan. However, he would need to see how receptive Orville was to the idea.

In September 1935, Orville Wright received a letter from Scripps expressing the Early Birds' affection and esteem for him and his pioneering work in aviation, and asked him to consider moving the 1903 Flyer home to America from England where it was on display, waiting for a permanent home. Scripps shared with Orville that he had brought to the attention of Mr. Edsel Ford the need for a proper home for aviation history and that the Edison Institute was interested in housing the Early Bird collection of aviation artifacts.

The Edison Institute and Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, were familiar to Orville. He had attended the grand opening with its "Lights Golden Jubilee" celebration in October 1929. Scripps perhaps hoped that the consideration of the workshop as an artifact might convince Orville of Ford's sincerity, and that the Flyer could rest here alongside



1127 W. Third St., Dayton, OH c. 1908. [credit: From the Collections of The Henry Ford]

the workshop.

Orville did not answer that letter from Scripps, stating later that it was the most delicate of all questions and one he could not readily answer in a letter.

A few months after writing his letter and having not heard back from Orville, Scripps sent his Detroit News Aviation Editor, James V. Piersol, to talk to Orville directly. Starting on December 12, Piersol sat down with Orville for 11 hours over two days. Orville, considered a quiet gentleman, was very talkative and openly sharing. It began with Orville immediately showing Piersol the unanswered letter from Scripps. After he gave a brief apology for not answering, Orville began a detailed explanation as to why the Flyer was in England and not in the United States.

Orville was upset that the Smithsonian had publicly stated that Langley's Aerodrome was the first airplane 'capable' of carrying a man in free sustained flight. This was not true and because the Smithsonian refused to correct their version of the story, Orville sent the plane to an English history museum. His hope was to shame the Smithsonian into changing the story of first flight. Orville believed that his and Wilbur's legacy was in jeopardy.

After a fluent, frank explanation, lasting two and a half hours, Orville paused, giving an opportunity for Piersol to interject. Piersol spoke up and said, "What you have told me and what you have shown me confirms the opinion and belief of all men who have studied your work." He continued, "That is why I am here, Mr. Ford wants to honor you at Greenfield Village as he has honored Thomas Edison and other great scientists. He wants to preserve your work for posterity." Tears filled Orville's eyes as he turned to face the window, just as his secretary Mabel Beck gently interrupted to end that day's interview. Orville turned to Piersol and said, "Mr. Ford is the greatest man in America, he has done more for this country than any other man. If I were to return the old plane I would as soon see him have it as anyone. Yet, I will not commit myself. I must think it over." The next afternoon, after discussing the proposal to preserve his shop and original work at Greenfield Village, Orville stated "I have never had a proposal like this before. It means a great deal. I must think it over."<sup>3</sup>

A few months after that interview, on April 11th 1936, Piersol representing the Edison Institute along with Orville's secretary Mabel Beck as a witness, signed the 'option to buy' document drawn up with the owners of the building, Charles and Annie Webbert.

Webbert had owned the building since its original construction, renovating it from a small home to the retail space rented to the Wrights. The Wright brothers moved

into the space as soon as Webbert converted it by adding the upstairs offices in 1897. The Wrights would occupy that space until Orville moved out, nineteen years later.

On June 29th, six months after his interview with Piersol, Orville visited Dearborn at the request of Edsel Ford, was shown the Greenfield Village site and discussed the move of the workshop where the first airplane was made. The site chosen to place the shop had been earmarked for a building that would house the Wright Flyer should Ford be able to convince Orville to bring it home. That building had been designed but was scrapped when the Flyer became unavailable to Ford. The site was now designated to hold the workshop that Henry was in the process of obtaining.

Three days later, on July 2nd, 1936, James Piersol signed the papers purchasing the building at 1127 W. Third street in Dayton, OH, for \$13,000. In today's dollars, this purchase price would be about \$224,000. Piersol immediately donated the building to Henry Ford to be disassembled and removed to Greenfield Village. The removal began in late October of that year. By November 19th, the building had been removed, and reconstruction begun on its new site in Greenfield Village.

Dayton's reaction to the purchase was swift. On July 5th, three days after the purchase, the editor of the Dayton Journal wrote an editorial which rebuked the citizens of Dayton for allowing yet another bit of Wright Brothers history to leave the city. First the plane is in England and now the birthplace of aviation would be removed to Dearborn, Michigan.



**Loren Wright, Wm. Scripps, Orville Wright, Edward Cutler and Henry Ford meet in the cycle shop to make drawings and take pictures for use in reconstruction. [credit: From the Collections of the Henry Ford]**

In his editorial titled 'Dayton's Lost Opportunity,' the editor points out the following; "Mr. Ford cannot be justly criticized for doing this. Indeed, his purchase of the building

constitutes new evidence of his appreciation of the worth to future generations."<sup>4</sup>

## *The Family Home*

In late October 1936, Henry Ford, his architect, Edward Cutler, Edsel Ford, and Wm. Scripps visit with Orville and his older brother Loren Wright in Dayton to inspect the cycle shop before disassembly began as scheduled the following week. While there, Wm. Scripps asked Orville where the old home would happen to be located. Orville and Scripps walked the four blocks to take a look.

Lottie Jones, the Wright's former laundress, had occupied the house since 1914, moving in after Orville, his sister Katharine, and their father moved out, purchasing the building in 1922 from Katharine Wright. On the walk over, Scripps quoted Orville as saying that Ford would not want the house as "it's just an old-fashioned house and would mar the landscape of Greenfield Village."<sup>5</sup>



**The Wright home and workshop March 1937 during reconstruction. [credit: From the Collections of The Henry Ford]**

Ford's response to Scripps on being told of Orville's thoughts on the home: "Old-fashioned nothing," Ford is reported as saying and continued, "Give me that home and we can make a little gem out of it."<sup>6</sup>

There were some discussions between Ford's agents and Mrs. Jones over price and original furnishings that Orville mentioned were still in the home. Ford paid Lottie \$4100 for the home and contents, which was \$100 more than she paid Katharine for it in 1922. Mrs. Jones owned other property and had a place to go, so she was able to hand over the building within the month. Both buildings had been altered and

updated during the Wright family absence, but Ford wanted the buildings to show the year 1903, the year the brothers flew for the first time. This would mean the removal of additions to both buildings and redecorating and reconstructing walls that had been changed since the Wrights moved out of each. This is where the timing of the move was beneficial to the Edison Institute as there were people still living who were very familiar with the buildings and who could help with their restoration.

Orville's niece, Ivonette Wright Miller, the Wright's housekeeper Carrie Grumbach, and Orville were all able to help recreate the black and white pictures and fill in the gaps due to lack of photographic evidence. The building you visit today is as close as Ford was able to recreate from the information given to him by these three people.

For the shop, Ford hired machinist Charlie Taylor, former Wright employee and maker of the first airplane engine, to help restore the shop to its 1903 days. Orville and Charlie, with the help of Orville's secretary, Mabel Beck, tracked down the original equipment used to make the first flyer. Ford placed them in the back of the cycle shop where they can still be seen today.



The author standing on original location of the cycle shop in Dayton, OH. [credit: author's collection]

The deconstruction and removal of the Wright Cycle shop began on Oct 30th, and lasted 13 days. Reconstruction began a week later in Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan. The homestead, Orville and Katharine's birthplace, began deconstruction on December 3rd, with reconstruction began in Dearborn on December 28th, 1936. It took nine days to take it apart and close to a year to reassemble.

The Wright Family Home and Cycle shop were dedicated on their current spots on April 16, 1938—what would have been Wilbur's 71st birthday.

It was a grand celebration with more than 150 attendees, including many members of the Wright family including brother Lorin Wright, his wife and children with their families, Orville's housekeeper of forty years, Carrie Grumbach, and Orville's secretary, Mabel Beck. Also in attendance were the Ford family, many other dignitaries, important American leaders and pioneers of aviation, including Wm. Scripps and over fifty members of the Early Birds.

Today the Wright Cycle Shop and the Wright Family Home stand in Dearborn in Greenfield Village as a testament to Henry Ford's desire to honor America's innovative leaders of our past who, through resourceful ingenuity and unwavering spirit, changed our world and made it a better place for all.

#### Source material:

From the Collections of The Henry Ford, Benson Ford Research Center, Wright Brothers Collection, Series #1623, E.I. 186

- 1- Wright Brothers Collection, E.I. 186
- 2- EB Chirp magazine May 1938, Dedication edition.
- 3- Piersol letter to Fred Black, Dec. 1935.
- 4- Dayton Journal, Letter from the Editor, July 5, 1936.
- 5- EB Chirp magazine May 1938, Dedication edition.
- 6- *ibid.*

#### Additional reading:

The Bishop's Boys, Dr. Tom Crouch  
The Wright Brothers, A Biography, Fred Kelly  
Wilbur and Orville: A Biography, Fred Howard  
From Bicycle to Biplane, F.C. Fisk & M.W. Todd



# The Early Days of the Dearborn Historical Museum

## A Firsthand Account

From the files of the Dearborn Historian, an Interview conducted by Donald V. Baut

*Editor's Note: In the 1830s, Congress decided to build a new arsenal on a 232 acre plot of land in the small village of Dearbornville. After the arsenal closed in 1875, the buildings were auctioned off. The building that served as the powder magazine was sold to Nathaniel Ross in 1882. He transformed the structure into a private dwelling. The last resident of the home, Mary Elizabeth "Lizzie" Ross, will the home, land, outbuildings and all of her worldly possessions to the City of Dearborn to be used as a museum. The structure, known today as the McFadden Ross House, opened as a museum in 1956. Mr. Walter Wurst played a major role in the structure being transformed into a museum. Before his employment at the museum, he was a partner in a Hudson-Essex Agency selling cars in Dearborn. Wurst then worked for Ford Motor Company as a painter and decorator until finding employment at the museum. The oral history Mr. Wurst related to Museum staff is printed below and provides a window into the early days at the Dearborn Historical Museum. In some cases, people or terms are identified in parentheses for clarity and explanation. The portion of the interview printed here begins with Mr. Wurst's experience at the Museum.*

**MR. B. Well, that takes us down to 1953. What happened after you left Kaiser?**

MR. W: I had a year's vacation. Nothing to do, couldn't get anything to do and one or another. You got nowhere all the time. Finally, I read the ad in the paper that they wanted a guard and guide for the Historical Museum. I said, "I've been talking thirty years for a living. Maybe I can do something over there." So I came over and made (an) application - for the job and the date was set. I went over and talked to the Commission. Iris Becker was on the Commission at that time, so was Lucile Marshall who's still there and the rest of them. (Lucile Marshall died February 9, 1975.) They interviewed three of us that night for the job. I went back downstairs. It was upstairs in the Commandant's Quarters over there and she said, "We'd like to talk to you after." I said, "Okay." So, they told me they decided on me for the job. I started the next day. That's the way that happened. I rounded out five years here.

**MR. B: What was your first job when you came here?**

MR. W: I was a guard and guide. I went through all the files to get the history of the both buildings an one thing and another. I don't remember all of it right now but it was very



**McFadden Ross Home 1956 - After much planning and many labor hours, the former Powder Magazine and home was dedicated as part of the Dearborn Historical Museum in October of 1956.**



**Major alterations were made to create a meeting room area for the Museum. This room is still used for lectures and many and varied Museum and club related activities.**

interesting anyway. They wanted me to get acquainted with all the buildings when they were built and what they were. That was the Powder Magazine over there and the other was the Commandant's (Quarters) which consisted of twelve buildings over there.

So not too long after that, Miss Lizzie Ross willed this

building to the City of Dearborn. But the clause was in it that it had to be turned into a museum or else they couldn't accept it. So, the Commission said, "Well, we have to remodel this building." It was just the way her and her brother, Lytle, left it when they lived here. "We have to remodel this building." So, this is alright and they talked to the Mayor. He wanted to know what it was going to cost. So, they got a price of forty thousand dollars to remodel this Powder Magazine to be known as the McFadden-Ross Museum. The Mayor wouldn't go for that. That was too much money.

He wouldn't put that kind of money in there at all. So, they said, "Well, we'll have to figure out something else because we can't acquire it. We can't use it unless it's turned into a museum."

So, I don't know who decided. Harry Molemaker was the carpenter here and a very good man. I think he made a proposition to them that we'll go ahead and do this on a shoestring, day by day. He said, "Walt and I will work. He's a painter and a decorator and I'm a carpenter. He can be a carpenter too. In other words, he's handy. He can do this and that and anything we do." So, all we want the city to do is to furnish the electricians, the sewer men and the wiring as we went along. If they would do that we would go ahead. Then they agreed to that.

We went ahead and started to remodel this thing and it took us two years to do it. The floor we did. We chopped into those twenty-four inch walls, put the show cases in there. We extended the roof back, built that other room in the back up there. Well anyway, it was a lot of hard work and we got it done. But I understand that we got it done for around twenty thousand dollars. That was half of the contract.

**MR. B: How did you find the McFadden-Ross home when you went in there?**

MR. W: Very deteriorated. The cobwebs were hanging three feet from the ceiling, black cobwebs. You know Lizzie Ross and her brother only lived in two rooms. The rest of the rooms were closed up, nobody in them. The wallpaper was black and the cobwebs and things. Of course, there was a vaulted ceiling upstairs. That was in there with wooden pegs and such as that. But everything was just simply dirty. There was two, three inches of dirt on the floor.

**MR. B: Was that your first job?**

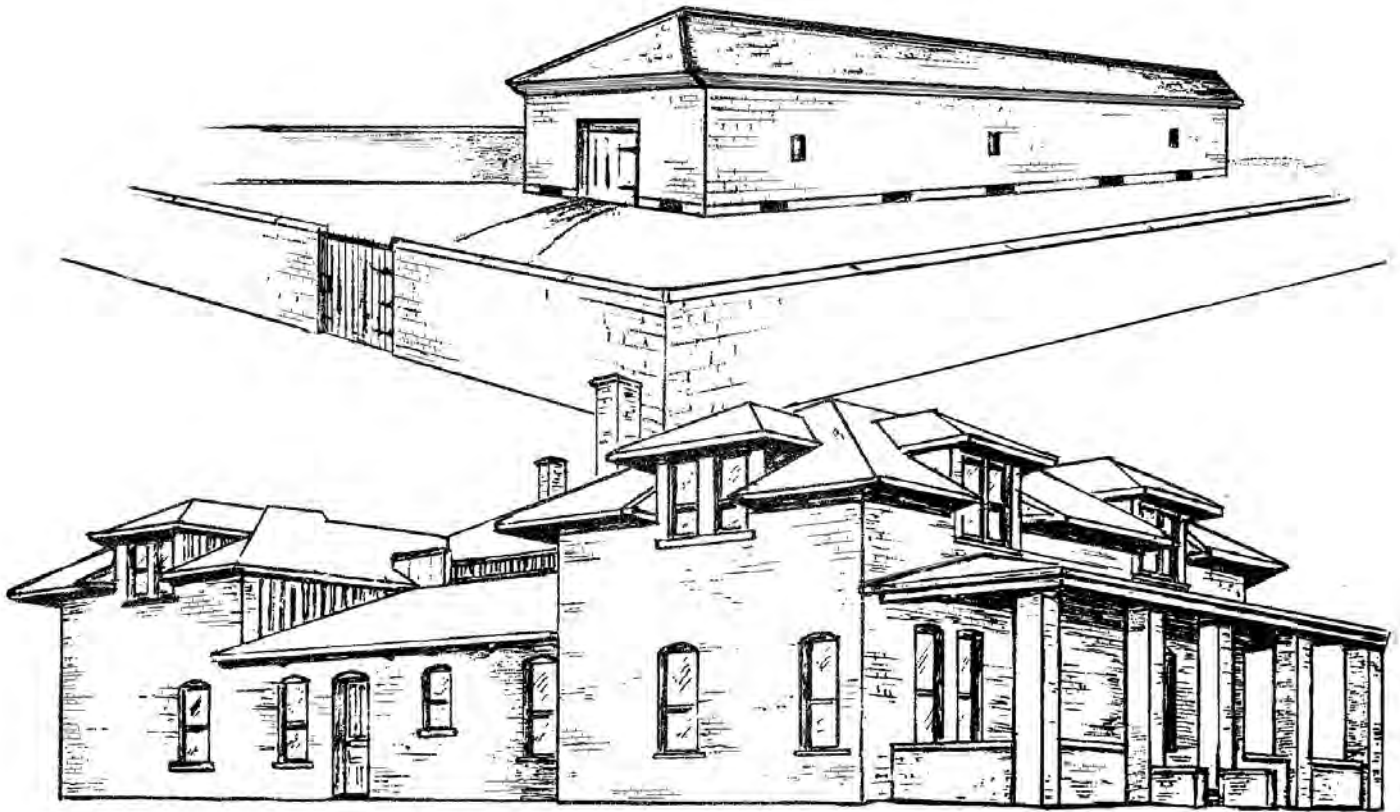
MR. W: That's right. We had to clean it up.

**MR. B: How long did it take you two to do that?**

MR. W: Well, I guess it took around three weeks, four weeks, a month. We had to clean that thing up. It was really bad.

**MR. B: The front door, was that on the south side of the building?**

MR. W: No, the front door was there where it is. There was another door off the side (to) the cellar, on an incline, you



**This image shows the stark changes made over the years. From a powder magazine to a private residence to a Museum.**

know, that you go down in the cellar, like that, like a storage cellar. That was on this side (north side).

**MR. B: There was also, I believe, a little kitchen or a little washroom back there.**

MR. W: Yes. There was a washroom in the kitchen to the back there, too.

**MR.. B: Now going through the front door, what rooms were on your left as you go in the front door today?**

MR. W: There was a room that was supposed to be a bedroom, a small bedroom, on the left. (Today the front stairs.) The big room was on the right as (it) is now. The right room was what you call the parlor. There was no center hall at that time. We put that in. You went into a small room here. You went back there (it was short hall, see) and you entered as you went into the kitchen, see. There was another bedroom there. Downstairs, I think, there (were) three bedrooms and two or three bedrooms upstairs. .

**MR. B: I thought there was at least seven bedrooms in the whole (house).**

MR. W: There could have been that many.

**MR. B: Now, of course, the coat room. and the what today is the dining display were the bedrooms.**

MR. W.: That was a bedroom.

**MR. B: Now the first door on your left was a bedroom.**

MR. W: That was a bedroom.

**MR. B: Now the next door was what?**

MR. W.: That was a bedroom too. Where the bathroom is in there (is) restored. That was the bathroom originally where the bathroom display is? Where the bathroom is now, that's right.

**MR. B: Now where the meeting room is, what was that in there? I think there were two rooms in there with a stairway.**

MR. W: There were two rooms. We stripped that up and made one big room for the meeting room.

**MR. B: Now what room was the first one, next to the parlor today?**

MR.. W: Well, as far as I can. think, that was a dining room because the way the dining room display is today. That was a bedroom back in there and that was the dining room in back of the parlor.

**MR. B: There was a doorway on the south side.**

MR. W: That's. right there was a door.

**MR. B: Alright, then the next room, that (would) be the east half of the meeting room, what is now the dining display, and the coat room, what room was that?**

MR. W: That was what you'd call sort of a storage room I

would think. It wasn't big enough in there for- a bedroom. It's for storage, where the cloak room is now.

**MR. B: Well, you take that. room, where the stairway was, what room was that?**

MR. W: The stairway came down.

**MR. B: The one in back of the parlor, was that the sitting room in there?**

MR. W: (It) could have been. You know in those days you had what they called a parlor and you had a sitting room and they had a double deal. We took that stair way all out. We put in that front room up there

**MR. B: You got that door on the east side there. Now was there a doorway in there?**

MR. W: There was a single door there. We made a double door.

**MR. B: About where the kitchen is today, what was there?**

MR. W: Well, the kitchen is on the left side.

**MR. B: On the north side.**

MR. W: That door is original. We didn't change that door. It wasn't a kitchen at that time. It was just another room. I don't know what that was because the kitchen was a small one behind that. I wouldn't know what to call it. But there was a room there where you come in from the outside.

**MR. B: Where we have the washing. exhibit (Play room, 1981), what was in there?**

MR. W: There wasn't anything there. We put that back stairway in. We had to go down with that back stairway. That's where the kitchen was. We wiped that all out and the kitchen was put up where it is now. The stairway running down there where you turn, (we) had to take that all out of there. We also built the roof up over there and extended that on the top of that.

**MR B: Yes. You put a dormer in.**

MR. W: That's right. There was a meeting room upstairs, . We made a new meeting room in the back under that new roof if you come out there. That's the room up stairs in the back to the left.

**MR. B: Now going up the old stairway, that would have been off of that, where the meeting room is today.**

MR. W: You went into sort of a hall and the front was a bedroom where it is right now. (Historical Records, 1981 - D.B.) Now where we have the bedroom today, that 1893 bedroom (Newspaper room, 1981) the northwest side here. That was a bedroom.

**MR. B: Now where we have the play room (Historical Records, 1981) that was also a bedroom. That would be in**



Loren Wright, Wm. Scripps, Orville Wright, Edward Cutler and Henry Ford meet in the cycle shop to make drawings and take pictures for use in reconstruction. [credit: From the Collections of the Henry Ford]

**the front.**

MR. W: That's right.

**MR. B: And where we have the big room.**

MR. W: We took the partition out and made the big room out of two bedrooms there. (Library, 1981)

**MR. B: How were you able to get into the cellar? Did you have to go in from the outside?**

MR. W: There was a stairway just two-by-sixes across there. You had to hang on and go down to the stairway.

**MR. B: Where was that stairway?**

MR. W: That came off one of those rooms there; to the back there to the left, pretty near where the kitchen is right now. That's where that was, a narrow stairway going down there, maybe eighteen inches. You had to hang on going down, there was just boards across when you go down.

**MR. B: It was on about a ninety-degree angle, wasn't it?**

MR. W: That's right, it was very sharp.

**MR. B: Well, down in the basement, what was the basement like down there after you got the junk cleared out?**

MR. W: Well, the basement was really full of bottles, full of junk. There was wine down there, I guess. God knows how old it was and one thing or another. Several of those fellows tried some but I said, "No, I don't want any of that. (It) might kill you. I don't want any." And bottle caps off of bottles, thousands of bottle caps that she had stored down there. She kept everything. Lizzie Ross never threw anything away. And newspapers piled up to the ceiling here and there and everything else. Of course, they wanted to save them and go through them. They did. They went all through those things. And lots of crockery jugs sitting around in there and the floor

was just simply rock. It wasn't brick. It was stone, just a rough floor, and the walls were just rough stone.

**MR. B: The basement, was it the whole length or was it just in the back?**

MR. W: It was the full length until we got to where we put the new stairway down. We had to get down in there to put the new stairway. That stairway, see, that's on the left-hand side to the rear.

**MR. B: How far did the basement go towards the front of the building?**

MR. W: The basement went to the front. They put an oil burner in there after. She (Miss Ross) didn't have (an) oil burner in there at the time she was living there. We put an oil burner in there and the basement went to the front, to the stairway up to there. That's where the basement ended. That's where we excavated to put that stairway in there.

**MR. B: Well, what about the little cellar that's under the stairway? Was that there?**

MR. W: Yes. That was there.

**MR. B: Was there a hallway or anything like that?**

MR. W: No. It was just here and there. There wasn't any partitions in there at all.

**MR. B: What about the Michigan cellar?**

MR. W: Then over on your left, where you have the big wall coming up, that was in there.

**MR. B: That little recess was in there before the Michigan cellar?**

MR. W: No. The one on the left side was not there. That was put in there, all brick. It's bricked up all the way around. This one was there on the outside to hold up those walls. That was all put in there. We just wanted to get the layout before it was restored and reconstructed.

**MR. B: What was the first job that you had after you got through with your cleaning, do you recall?**

MR. W: They decided that this dormer had to go back. We had to go up and work on the roof, putting this room at the top. That's the northeast corner. We went ahead and changed that roof, put in that whole new roof and put in that room up there.

**MR. B: Well, when did you take out the little room that was a kind of washroom? Was that after or before?**

MR. W: Oh, I think we took that out before. Yes. We took that out. We took everything that was going to go according to the plans they had to take out these partitions and fix a center hall and chisel into the two-foot wall and put those showcases in there. That was a job. (We) chiseled that all in there by hand.

(It) made a nice display case, though.

**MR. B: Who helped you besides Mr. Molemaker?**

MR. W: Well, we had a little help from different boys. I don't know who they were but we had some boys working. Two or three different ones were helping us at the time. Well, one boy who was with us, his father's a policeman, a big tall fellow. I can't remember his name. He was alright. But we had different ones. They hired some extra boys to do this and do that.



**Leonard Johnson served as Director of the Dearborn Historical Museum from 1955 until 1960.**

**MR. B: What was your first decorating job after you got the cases chiseled out and into the wall in today's hallway?**

MR. W: After we had the partitions and one thing or another, that's the parlor in the front room and the big room in back of that, we went at that. Then the others. Two last ones were the hall and the office over on this side where the office is. Yes, we started on the front right there at the parlor and went that way right through that way.

**MR. B: In other words, you started from the front and you worked back on the south side and then you probably swung around and came back on the north side and finished all that.**

MR. W: That's right. Of course, before we got to the paint, we had to put in the stairway in the front and the stairway in the back. That's all birch. I did that. It's still standing. The posts and pedestals are birch, the same stuff on there that we put that on there.

**MR. B: Was that turned down by lathe?**

MR. W: Yes. We bought those from a lumber company.

**MR. B: Oh, that was already turned down.**

MR. W: The specifications told them what they wanted. That was a big job.

**MR. B: There's a lot of hard elbow grease that went into that.**

MR. W: We really worked over there, a big job. But that was the only way we could get it done. They wanted it turned into a museum so I said, "What do you want?" He said, "Well, you said we'll take it on if they give us the help. We'll take it on if they give us enough." So that was it. We couldn't quit then.

**MR. B: Were you here when Bob Bauman was? (Bob**

# FROM THE COLLECTIONS

## PUTTING THE WORLD BACK TOGETHER:

### Restoring an 1844 Loring's terrestrial globe

By Matthew Graff, Collections Manager  
Dearborn Historical Museum

December 1845, Christmastime at the Petersilea family home had come once again. A young four-year-old boy eagerly receives a Christmas present from his father: an 1844 Loring's terrestrial globe. His father had inscribed a message in a mixture of script and print on the lower edge of the globe's surrounding ring: "E.A. Petersilea is born in St. Johns, N.B., July 17th, 1841. He arrived in Boston with his parents in the month of August 1843. Given to Edwin Alexis Petersilea as a Christmas present by his affectionate father, 1845."

Nearly a century passed before this globe was donated to the Dearborn Historical Society in the summer of 1944 by Lewis Hughes. Originally, the globe was found in poor condition in an attic on Porath Street before being donated to the Dearborn Public Library, and then eventually the Dearborn Historical Society. How the globe wound up in Dearborn in an attic on Porath Street is unclear, but thanks to a thoughtful father, the origin of the globe as a gift to his son is permanently preserved around the outside ring.

Another 75 years went by, and in that time the globe gathered dust in a corner of the Officer's Bedroom at the Commandant's Quarters, its story long since forgotten - until one day when professional conservator and friend to the Dearborn Historical Museum, Mark Gervasi, eyed it on an extended tour of the building as a piece he would like to restore one day. After Museum collections staff and volunteers examined the piece and discovered the inscription and history of the globe, Gervasi, head conservator at the Edsel and Eleanor Ford House, returned to take the piece back to his home workshop in St. Clair Shores. Using grant funds from the Americana Foundation, Gervasi worked to bring the piece back to its former glory. After two months and 50 hours of time invested in this endeavor, Gervasi successfully completed the project. Gervasi described his work on the globe as a "very enjoyable process." He experienced first-hand the "joy of seeing something underappreciated because of the condition" become a stand-out piece once again.

The geographic detail of the globe itself was initially created by being engraved into copper. The copper allowed for fine lines and text to be engraved, for names of cities, countries, and other geographic information. The individual sections of the globe would then be printed onto paper that could be copied and glued onto a paper-machete substrate. The globe was then mounted on a light-stained clear-coated four-legged wooden stand, with a brass ring attached at the poles with a mechanism to rotate the sphere.

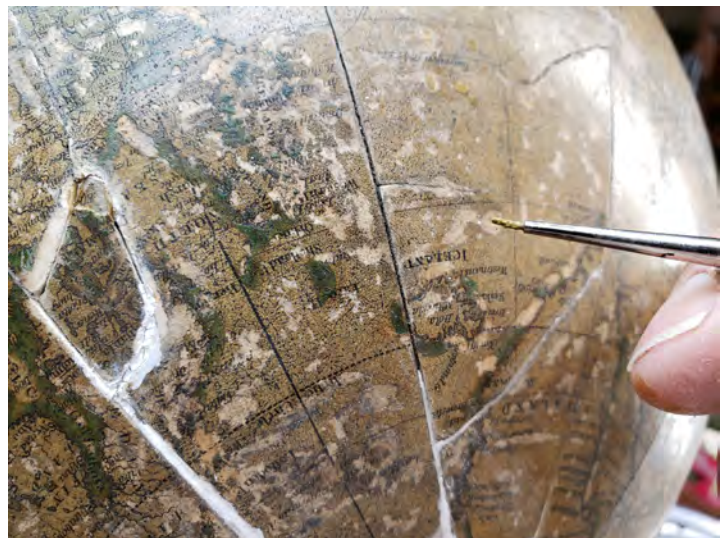
Over time, large holes had formed at the ice caps, preventing the globe from being able to pivot properly. To



Two views of the globe prior to restoration. The origin of the globe as a gift is permanently preserved around the outside ring.



Prior to restoration, severe damage at the ice caps prevented the globe from turning on its axis.



During restoration, a variety of techniques were used to repair decades of damage.

wooden stand, with a brass ring attached at the poles with a mechanism to rotate the sphere.

Over time, large holes had formed at the ice caps, preventing the globe from being able to pivot properly. To correct this, Gervasi filled the areas around the poles using several applications of gesso to complete the spherical shape. He then gradually in-painted the area to match the rest of the globe. In the center of a globe was a wooden rod, where Gervasi could put the fill material around. The holes near the equator were trickier because there was nothing to attach the filling to, so Gervasi added wooden supports from which to attach the filling. He then correctly repositioned the globe around the ring. He used a diluted solution that saturated into the paper mache while structurally putting the globe back into alignment.

Once that was in place, Gervasi started the meticulous process of cleaning the surface. He actually cleaned the varnish covering the fragile paper; but had to be careful so

as not to damage the paper substrate beneath. Gervasi used a mild detergent mixed with saliva on Q-tips to clean parts of the globe that had been obscured, including areas labeled “Russian America,” “Indian Territory,” and other areas unique to the time period in which the globe was made. Gervasi would initially clean areas and then later repeatedly go over the same area in order to incrementally remove the dirt so as not to do any damage to the varnish and paper itself. When the project was completed, Gervasi remarked that the Petersilea family globe was “one of my favorite pieces that I’ve worked on.” Gervasi summarized his approach with the following statement: “If you look at the whole project, it could overwhelm you, but if you work through it incrementally, it’s possible.” With great skill, patience, and determination, Mark Gervasi was able to successfully put the world back together, and in so doing, he restored a long-forgotten present from father to son from a Christmas long ago.



**The completed restoration.**

*Interview continued from page 12*

**Bauman became the second Director of the Dearborn Historical Museum in February of 1951)**

MR. W: He had just left as I came. Yes, he left. Then Johnson came along.

**MR. B: It was under Leonard Johnson's direction. (Leonard Johnson was Director of the DHM from 1955-1960)**

MR. W: What's his name was under Johnson. He went to Toledo. Barbee, Barbee. He was a school teacher, I guess. He's down there teaching school in Toledo. That's what I understand.

**MR. B: Were you here when Al Woolworth came too?**

MR. W: Yes, Woolworth, that's right.

**MR. B: He was supposed to be curator of exhibits I believe, wasn't it?**

MR. W: Yes, I think that's what he was.

**MR. B: Aurelia, of course, she's still here.**

MR. W: Aurelia is still here and Aurelia was over there when I first started. She was over there sorting out clothes out of all these great big boxes that Lizzie Ross had. I recall those green trunks or whatever, those great big long boxes full of clothes and one thing or another. Aurelia was sorting those clothes where I first met her. Aurelia's the oldest one of the employees right now. My last day (was December 31, 1958).

**MR. B: Mr. Wurst, who were some of the first organizations to meet over here at the McFadden-Ross House?**

MR. W: (The) first one was the Dearborn Woman's Club and Study Club and Zonta (an organization, still in existence, which aims to empower women through service and advocacy) met over here. Then the League of Women Voters were one of the pioneers. Then the Old Car Club. DeNies, who was one of the instructors here at one time, was the head of that club at the time. They met here. The other one was the Lapidary Society. They came in later on. We had about seven or eight or nine of them. They'd meet on different nights. I was on each night until they got through, sometimes 11:30, sometimes 12:00. You serve the lunch after. They had quite a nice time.

**MR. B: Do you recall any incidences during those first years that you were here at the Museum?**

MR. W: Well, at the time when we were doing this. We had several old timers that lived around here that would come over and want to know what we were doing and what we were going to do. They'd been around here, they were older than we were. We asked them different questions about this building known as the Powder Magazine. There was a lot of discussion about a tunnel running from this place over to the Commandant's (Quarters). So this fellow says, "Why, there was a tunnel. I played in this tunnel." We said, "Well, where did it run?" He said, "It came into this place, the Michi gan cellar in there. He said, "It came into here." So we had the City break a hole



**A view of the back exterior before alteration. The kitchen area just inside the doorway was torn down, a back stairway installed and the roof extended with a dormer put in to create another meeting room upstairs.**

through the wall in there and (it) was about this deep about that square, you could crawl. So, we had one of these boys crawl in there and see how far he could go, but it only went out a little beyond the front of the building and it stopped there. That wasn't the tunnel that these fellows were talking about, we found after. As you know, there was a cistern in the middle of the (Arsenal) grounds over there, in the middle, a round cistern. The tunnel that these fellows were talking about was the overflow running from that cistern down towards the Rouge River here, which was big enough to walk in and to get into. Now that's what we gathered by talking to the old fellows. That was the tunnel they were talking about. It was the overflow from the water of that cistern. Otherwise she'd of run up all over the ground when it rained hard. They had to have a place to run it off. That's as near as we know what was established about the tunnel, being a tunnel running from there running to here. It didn't run over to here but it just ran off some place so that the water could get off to the Rouge River. That's what we understand what that was. We talked to several different guys that said that they played in it and this and that when they were young.

**MR. B: . Did you ever go down to -the Rouge River and see if you could find the other side of it at all?**

MR. W: No. We never did.

**MR. B: Now, how large was this tunnel that you did find? Was it about two and a half by two and a half?**

MR. W: Yes, about like that. It's square.

**MR. B: Square, a perfect square.**

MR. W: Enough to crawl into.

**MR. B: Now where is that?**

MR. W: That's at the front of the Michigan cellar as you go into the Michigan cellar on the right before you go into it. It's bricked up right there now. The bricks are all back up. (It) probably ran fifteen feet. Yes, and it dropped out. We sent a boy in there to see where the thing went to and it was a dead end about fifteen feet, just a lot of dirt. We don't know what that was. We don't figure that that ran over to the Commandant's (Quarters) at all. We figured the other was an overflow which they were talking about.

**MR. B: Of course, we found another cistern over here on the south side, a cistern of some sort. We hope to have that done some time- this summer. Right now we have planks over it but the earth began to settle. Oh, it must have been about two feet or so just about a year or so ago. So, we dug in that area this last summer. Well, Mr. Wurst, it's certainly been a pleasure having you here.**

MR. W: Well, I'm glad to talk to you. I probably don't remember a hundred per cent but that's pretty close.

**MR. B: We certainly appreciate you taking the time and coming over.**

MR. W: Glad to be of any help when I can.



**The structure has served the City of Dearborn as a Museum for over 60 years.**

# Park to Commemorate the Ford Hunger March, But the Questions Remain

by L. Glenn O’Kray



**Demonstrators filling the streets en route to the Rouge Plant**

Perhaps all of us are in denial in one way or another. But it is hard to believe that the country was in denial about the Ford Hunger March for years.

March is the month named after Mars, the god of war. Somehow it seems fitting that the infamous Ford Hunger March occurred during that bleak month of the year, specifically on March 7, 1932.

March of 1932 was especially bleak. The nation was in the depths of the Great Depression. Detroit was considered to be the hardest hit of 19 American cities. Two thirds of Ford’s employees had been laid off.

The Capuchin monastery was feeding some 800 people a day. Nonagenarian Roy Wilson said, “You couldn’t drive down the street without seeing families’ possessions thrown out on lawns because of their inability to pay the rent.” The National Guard provided homeless families with tents. The annual

average autoworker’s wage dropped from \$1639 in 1929 to \$757 in 1931. There were no unemployment benefits. Suicide rates jumped substantially.

The unemployment rate in Michigan was 25%. However, it was estimated that the unemployment rate in Detroit was 55-60%. Unions were small at that time, and people were looking for political alternatives such as socialism or communism as a way of dealing with the economic crisis.

There were “Unemployed Councils” throughout the United States. The largest was in Detroit. Detroit’s Unemployed Council and the Young Communist League organized a Hunger March. Their goals were to secure jobs for all laid-off Ford workers, immediately provide 50% of the workers’ wages, provide medical assistance at the Henry Ford Hospital, eliminate Ford Motor Company’s “service men,” eliminate foreclosure on homes of Ford employees, end racial discrimination and secure full wages for part time employees.

Although this was a political demonstration, it took on the tone of a union protest.

According to University of Michigan Professor Sidney Fine, there was little doubt that a November confrontation was deliberately provoked by the Communists. On March 7, 1932, some 3,000-5,000 marchers were to take a 30 to 40 minute walk from Detroit to the Ford Motor Company's Rouge complex, at that time the largest industrial center in the world. According to Fine, it appears that the leaders anticipated trouble and probable arrests. They did not get permits for the march. Even though the marchers did not have a permit, the Detroit police escorted them and found no disorder.

The leaders of the march urged all the protesters to be peaceful. In the book *Ford: Decline and Rebirth*, Allen Nevin and Frank Ernest Hill state that there had been previous demonstrations in front of Ford facilities with no untoward results.

When the body reached the Fort Street bridge, Dearborn police officers fired tear gas grenades at the marchers who then fought back. The workers threw rocks and frozen mud at the police and the accompanying Ford servicemen. There was hand-to-hand fighting. Firemen hosed down the marchers with cold water. Harry Bennett was at the scene and when he was injured, hundreds of bullets were fired into the crowd. He

fell unconscious and the corpse of one of the leaders, Joe York, fell over him and most probably protected him from being killed.

Ray Pillsbury, cameraman for the Detroit Mirror reported, "At gate three is an overhead bridge and a stairway with steps leading inside the gate. The firemen turned their trucks inside the gate and ran two lines of hose onto the bridge. The huge gates snapped shut with a bang and the police made their stand from the gate to the railroad tracks, paralleling Miller Road.

"Suddenly through the mob raced a Ford car containing two men, one of whom I learned later, was Harry Bennett, chief of Ford's private police. The car and its occupants were showered with rocks. I left the bridge and raced down to get a picture as I saw Bennett, reeling from a bleeding gash in the head get out of the car and slumped to the road in the space between the mob and the gate.

"They've got one of our own men," I heard a policeman shout as the mob closed around Bennett. Then policemen surged from behind the gate as someone shouted, "Let's get him." They rescued the injured Bennett and carried him behind the gate.



Ford Hunger March confrontation



**Ford Security Chief Harry Bennett**

“The mob then raced toward the gate as it swung open to let Bennett and his rescuers in, but before its leaders could reach it, the gate clanged shut. Through its openings, fifty policemen and guards leveled their shiny guns and pulled the triggers. I would guess that hundreds of shots were fired into the mob.

“I saw leaders drop, writhing with their wounds, and the mob dropped back leaving their casualties on the road.”

Dave Moore, a marcher, said, “It was a massacre. It was a massacre of innocent people who had no weapons whatsoever. They were just here to show Ford Motor Company that they want to work, and the answer was bullets.”

The police and/or Ford servicemen killed four workers. They were Joe Bussell, Joe York, Coleman Leny and Joe DeBlasio. A fifth, Curtis Williams, died in August of that year. He had been afraid to seek medical attention for his wounds. He was nursed several weeks in private homes before he died. At least 60 other workers were injured. They were taken to hospitals where they were chained to beds. The New York Times reported that “Dearborn streets were stained with blood, streets were littered with broken glass and the wreckage of bullet-riddled automobiles, and nearly every window in the Ford plant’s employment building had been broken.” Some 25

police officers had been injured as well.

In a recent interview, Marti Alston quoted her now-deceased husband, Christopher Columbus Alston, one of the leaders of the march. “When I saw the blood flowing on Miller Road, I became a revolutionary.”

On March 12, 1932 some 10,000 sympathizers attended a memorial procession down Woodward Avenue. Marchers carried signs saying, “Negro and White Unite,” “Smash Ford-Murphy Police Terror,” “We Want Bread, not Crumbs,” “Tax the Rich and Feed the Poor.”

The crowd ended up at Woodmere Cemetery where the four were buried. The crowd sang “The Internationale,” the Communist anthem.

Curtis Williams was not allowed to be buried in the cemetery because he was Black. He was cremated, and his remains were spread from an airplane over the Rouge facility.

Clyde Ford, Henry’s cousin, was the mayor of Dearborn at the time. The Detroit Free Press reported, “Those professional Communists alone are morally guilty of assault and killings which took place before the Ford plant.” Frank Murphy, the Detroit mayor who later became governor and then a U.S. Supreme Court justice, called Harry Bennett “an inhuman brute.” He called Henry Ford “a terrible man.”

As a follow up, those who made donations to the funerals or were involved in left wing organizations were fired from their jobs with the Ford Motor Company.

The American Civil Liberties Union completed a report on March 12, 1932. The organization found that those police officials and Ford “service people” had injuries that were caused by sticks and stones, not bullets. However, the injuries of the “paraders” were caused almost without exception by bullets in the sides and backs of the “paraders.”

Maurice Sugar, a labor attorney, convinced the grand jury not to indict the marchers. Not one of the police officers or servicemen was arrested for the massacre. The grand jury reported, “We find the conduct of the demonstrators ill-considered and unlawful in their utter disregard for constitutional authority. We find further that the Dearborn City Police, when they first met the demonstrators, though well intentioned, might have been more discrete and better considered before they applied force in the form of gas.”

A political ally of Frank Murphy on the grand jury called it the “most biased, prejudiced and ignorant proceeding imaginable.” However, no party was found guilty of shooting the marchers.



**This plaque commemorating the Hunger March stood near the Fort Street Bridge until it was re-built.**

The Hunger Strike was important in the founding of the United Auto Workers. Today Local 600 of the United Auto Workers whose office is a stone's throw from the burial site in Woodmere has several pictures hanging which portray the Hunger March. Bernie Ricke, the president of UAW Local 600, said that the plaque memorializing the Ford Hunger March was taken down when the Fort Street Bridge was re-built. The Michigan Department of Transportation does not want it reinstalled because the bridge is not the original one where the shooting occurred. The sign is being put up outside the local's office. The union wants to establish a park to commemorate those who died in the cause of social justice. The Ford Motor Company has donated \$100,000 to the cause.

Ricke said, "The Hunger March was an open secret for years. The City of Dearborn did not want to acknowledge it because the Dearborn Police were involved in the deaths of the workers. The Ford Motor Company did not want to recognize it because of their complicity. The Union did not want to acknowledge it because of the Communist influence on the proceedings."

Ricke said, "Thank God that those days are over. Today, the United Auto Workers and the Ford Motor Company have a great relationship. I lay this at the feet of the Ford family. I think that they have had a positive influence on the company." The Ford Motor Company did not respond to a request for a response to this article.

On the fiftieth anniversary of the march there was a commemoration service. Grave markers were laid for the four dead union workers. On the sixtieth anniversary, the union, under Bernie's leadership, had a march to commemorate the killings. A headstone was laid to commemorate Curtis Williams. Press from around the world came to witness this "remembering." Mayor Michael Guido welcomed the 3,000 marchers as they entered Dearborn. Some 13 veterans of that cold March day in 1932 showed up at the 60th anniversary.

The denial is over. The March is over. The month of March need be symbolic no longer of the deaths of those fighting for their survival.

However, two big questions remain: Who was responsible for the murders and why were they not prosecuted. Where was justice in this drama?

### ***Blaming the Victim***

The newspapers were generally not sympathetic to the workers. This was evidenced in their headlines as well as in their stories. The March 10, 1932 The Dearborn Press had this headline: "Safety Commission Lauds Police of City."

The story begins. "The Committee of Safety meeting together with the Council Committee on Safety praised Dearborn officers for the manner in which they handled the communist (sic) uprising at the Ford Motor plant and as far as they were concerned vindicated police officers in shooting and killing of four members of the mob."

The following headlines blamed the victims of the shootings.

"Reds Storm Ford Plant, Fight with Police"  
(The Detroit Free Press, March 8, 1932).

"18 Held in Mob Battle Face Federal Investigation"  
(The Detroit Evening Times, March 7, 1932).

"Murder Charges Asked After Red Mob Fights Police—Communists inflamed by Foster Hurl Stones and Clubs in Pre-arranged Outbreak—Harry Bennett & Others in Hospital Following Battle Started When Agitator Fires Six Shots" (The Detroit Free Press, March 8, 1932).

"Hunt Foster, Red Aides in Ford 'Food Riot Plot'"  
(The New York Daily Mirror, March 9, 1932).

"Bennett Hurt While in Peacemaker Role"  
(The New York Daily Mirror, March 9, 1932).

"U.S. Gets Plea to Apprehend Riot Leaders—Police of Dearborn Warns Reds of Further Moves"  
(The Detroit Free Press, March 9, 1932).

"Scenes as Police Fought Milling Thousands in Red Riot" (followed by pictures)  
(The Detroit Evening Times, March 7, 1932).

"5 Ford Riot Leaders Are Sought by Police—Prosecutor Says William Z. Foster May be Faced with Syndicalism Charge. Toy's Aides Quiz Prisoners. Members of Mob Can Not be Tried for Murder in Deaths of Others Who Took Part in Disturbance (The Detroit News, March 8, 1932)

"Communist Leaders Sought in Ford Riot and Man Jailed as a Speaker (The Detroit News, March 8, 1932).

"Ford Rioters Facing Trials" (The Detroit News, March 8, 1932).

**Dearborn Historical Museum**

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# Volunteers Needed

Each spring the Dearborn Historical Museum welcomes Dearborn Public Schools students for our Pioneer Field Trip Program Monday to Thursday from 9:30am to 11:30am. This rewarding program allows volunteers to work with children sharing what life was like in Dearborn during the 1830s. We are looking for volunteers to help make this program a success! If you are interested, please contact the Dearborn Historical Museum.



## Volunteer Opportunities Include:

- Historical Presenting
- Program Curriculum Planning
- Costume Making
- Event Planning
- And more!

Training is available for all volunteers! There is no minimum commitment.

*The Edison Institute high school promoted a program called "Learning by Doing." Henry Ford encouraged students to select jobs from a variety of occupations. Whether it was tending a garden, homemaking, or applying textbook theory to real life problems in a machine shop. Henry Ford's philosophy was that "Learning by Doing" would make the transition from home life to the working world easier. The following article relates a unique day for four boys that culminated with an encounter with Henry and Clara Ford and the implementation of that "Learning by Doing" philosophy.*

# The Tractor Ride

By Joseph Dulmage

Four boys strolled lazily along the wide street in front of the Edison Institute. The July sun warmed the bricks beneath their feet, and they could feel heat coming through their shoes. They entered Greenfield Village and continued walking until they reached the McGuffey Schoolhouse.

Jack and Henry sat down on the lawn and leaned back on their elbows. Bill and John plopped beside them and assumed identical positions. The hot day aggravated their boredom. Suddenly John jumped to his feet; about one hundred yards away was a new 1941 Ford tractor parked alongside the road. The boys trotted down the street for a closer look.

Their inspection soon discovered keys left in the ignition. The boys looked at one another, then they looked around at the deserted village streets. After a short debate with conscience, they all agreed that no one would mind if they took the tractor for a ride.

Jack climbed onto the seat, turned the key and pushed the starter; the tractor fired. The other boys ran about the tractor looking for a spot to sit, stand, or hang on. Bill lay across the hood. Henry and John stood on the two lift bars that extended from each side of the rear tires. Only a short drive convinced them the tractor was too slow for any meaningful adventure. Jack said he knew how to fix things. Stopping the tractor, he examined the engine until he found the governor.

"We need some wire," he said.

The boys scurried down the streets and village lawns searching for wire. Finally, John found some. It was being used to hang a sign on a post. Jack tied the wire to the governor, and everyone climbed back on the tractor. Bill, laying on the hood, had the responsibility of holding the wire which kept the governor in a wide-open position.

The boys spent next ten minutes zooming through the village streets at an exhilarating and accelerating pace. While trying to negotiate a turn at high speed, their squeals of laughter suddenly died. Directly in front of them was Mrs. Henry Ford's custom made Lincoln. The horizontal spare tire attached to the rear of the car identified the owner. Jack turned the wheel sharply, missing the car but plowed through some border shrubbery beside the road. The tractor skidded on the grass beyond the shrubs and lurched back

onto the road before coming to a halt.

The Lincoln's horn blared in loud, consecutive blasts. The boys slowly turned their heads and watched Robert Rankin, Clara Ford's chauffeur, exit the car and open the Lincoln's rear door. Mrs. Clara Ford stepped out followed closely by her husband. Mrs. Ford marched toward them.

"Get off that tractor this second," she yelled. Four boys scrambled off the tractor and stood in front of Mrs. Ford.

"Do you realize you could have killed us?" she said. "It's a miracle you didn't kill yourselves! You have no right to be on that tractor. It isn't yours. Not one of you is even old enough to have a driver's license, and here you are joy riding about like a bunch of lunatics. You ruined a bush back there (she pointed to the crushed shrubbery). All of you should be ashamed of yourselves!" Clara turned to her husband. "Henry, don't you have anything to say?"

"I'd like to talk to the boys alone," he said.

"Well, I should think so," she said and strode back to the car. Mr. Rankin opened the door and let her in.

Looking very worried, the boys stood in front of Henry Ford. "Boys," said Henry Ford in a stern voice. "There is one thing I'd like to ask you."

Four weak, "Yes sir," chorused from the boys.

"How in the world did you get the tractor to go so fast?" he asked.

The boys admitted to taking the wire, and showed Mr. Ford how they tied it to the governor.

"Good thinking," Mr. Ford said quietly. "Now take the wire off and leave the tractor here."

Henry Ford walked back to his car and got in. The boys watched as the big Lincoln moved slowly down the street.



*Editor's Note: This story was written by Joseph Dulmage. His father, Jack Dulmage, who actually experienced the events, related it to his son. Joe's family has a rich legacy in the area. Both his mother and father attended the Greenfield Village Schools at The Edison Institute from 1st grade through 12th grade and both were guides at Greenfield Village. In addition, Joe's grandfather was the powerhouse manager at the Henry Ford Estate and was close friends with Henry Ford.*

# discovering dearborn's hidden history

## Dr. Piccard's Flight to Fame

by Craig Hutchison

There it stands. Just a few feet in front of the entrance to William B. Stout Middle School which sits on the corner of Rotunda Drive and Oakwood Boulevard, there stands a plaque which commemorates an historic event that took place at the Ford Airport back in 1934. Visitors to the area will have to get fairly close to the plaque in order to read the following text:

Near this location and not far from The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village was located the Ford Airport. Here, aviation history was made on October 23, 1934, when Dr. Jeannette Piccard made an ascent in a hydrogen filled balloon. Accompanying her was her husband Dr. Jean Piccard, scientific director and observer, who made a study of the cosmic rays. Jeannette Piccard was the first woman in the world to pilot a balloon into the stratosphere. Her 175 foot tall balloon attained an altitude of 57,559 feet.

Yes, this actually happened in Dearborn, an area that has a very rich historical underpinning. Jeannette Ridlon Piccard was the first licensed female balloon pilot in the United States and the first woman to fly into the stratosphere. When she first decided to try and reach the stratosphere on her own, she traveled to Dearborn with her husband in 1933 to study under an expert balloonist at the Ford Airport. The Ford Airport itself is historic as it was not only one of the world's first airports, but also a trailblazer in anything and everything related to the early history of flight. Henry Ford was very supportive of the Piccard's attempt and not

only offered them the use of a hanger on the grounds, but also invited Orville Wright to observe.

By October of 1934, Piccard felt she was ready. The balloon she would pilot was known as the Century of Progress. It was the world's largest hydrogen gas balloon and was built for the 1933 Century of Progress International Exposition in Chicago. On October 23, 1934, after the playing of the Star Spangled Banner, the husband and wife team lifted off from the Ford Airport. They reached a height of 10.9 miles and traveled for over 300 miles over Lake Erie. Landing on some trees, Jean sustained some fractures of his ribs, left foot and ankle. However, he would make a full



The Piccards emerge from the gondola portion after their historic flight from Ford Airport in Dearborn.

recovery. The flight, although a record breaker in many ways, was also useful as a way to investigate the nature of cosmic rays. Their findings contributed to the space program at the time. Dr. Piccard held the women's altitude record for 29 years and as stated earlier, became the first woman to enter the stratosphere.

In May of 1965, there was a Heritage Day feature that took place as part of Michigan Week celebration in Dearborn. One of the events that was held was intended to honor Dr. Jeannette and Jean Piccard for their accomplishments that took place on that historic day back in 1934. On May 20, 1965, they were honored with a dinner at Greenfield Village. Their accomplishments were then recognized with the placement of a memorial plaque at William B. Stout Middle School. The same memorial plaque that still stands there today.

Craig Hutchison  
Communications Specialist  
Dearborn Historical Museum

*The information used in this article was drawn from the archives of the Dearborn Historical Museum. We invite you to visit us and discover more interesting and enriching stories from this area's history. Contact us via our website at [thedhm.com](http://thedhm.com) or by calling 313-595-3000.*



This commemorative plaque stands in front of Stout Middle School and honors the historic flight of the Piccards on October 23, 1934.



**Dearborn Historical Museum  
Calendar of Events Winter 2020**

**February**

5th: Corktown Then and Now Lecture by Tim McKay 7:00 pm  
 8th: STEM Saturday Wacky Weather Event 12:00 pm  
 14th: Valentines Murder Mystery Event 6:00 pm  
 15th: Museum Guild of Dearborn Euchre Tournament 6:00 pm

**March**

4th: Haunting Metro Lecture by Jon Milan 7:00 pm  
 7th: Ghost Hunt 8:00 pm  
 15th: Kids 'N' Crafts St. Patrick's Day Event 12:00 pm  
 27th: The Big Read Lecture; The Early Landscape of Dearborn 7:00 pm

**April**

1st: Hamtramck Transformed Lecture by Greg Kowalski 7:00 pm  
 11th: STEM Saturdays Make It Move Event 12:00 pm  
 24th: Banjo Concert 1:00 pm

**May**

3rd: Kids 'N' Crafts Kindness Rocks Event 12:00 pm  
 6th: Ford Homes Lecture by Glenn O'Kray 7:00 pm  
 9th: Dearborn Historical Museum Trunk Sale & Dearborn Herb Study Association  
 Spring Herb & Craft Sale 9:00 am  
 25th: Dearborn Memorial Day Parade 11:00 am

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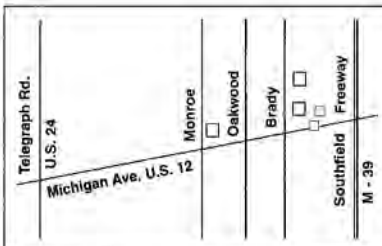
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