

Old Times

Newsletter of the North Lee County (Iowa) Historical Society and Museum

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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



By Andy Andrews

The North Lee County Historical Society Museum has undertaken its biggest transformation in our 41 years since we opened the first museum in the 1910 ATSF Depot that the Society saved from demolition in 1968.

The US Congressional mandate caused the museum to vacate the east 2/3 of the Passenger Depot for the future AMTRAK Station which we unknowingly authorized back in 2013 when the Society agreed to cooperate with the City if AMTRAK should ever relocate to the historic depot that we still have leased until 2040.

This caused the NLCHS to fit more museum displays in the remaining west 1/3 of depot, the Railway Express Office, the Division Freight Office and the CB&Q Depot, which caused us to place many display cases in storage and items in those cases into storage in the crowded 2nd floor of the Division Freight Office.

This was accomplished in about 15 days in August after the City gave the order. Very

little remains in the AMTRAK area as I write this message.

As the NLCHS has the mission to preserve, protect and share our area history, all items that were donated to the Society since 1961 are still in our collection, just not as much is displayed. This caused our accession person to change the locations of thousands of items to their new location which will go on for months in our computerized program.

The Avenue H construction has hindered tourists to find us, but 1,805 visitors have signed our guest book so far in 2021 with probably 50% drawn to the museum compliments of the Virtual Rail Fan camera at the Kingsley Inn, installed in July 2020. Very few of the American Cruise Lines passengers visit us, since we are not a regular bus stop when tourists arrive on tour boats.

The next public meeting of the Society will still be held in the vacant future AMTRAK waiting room at 7 pm, Tuesday, October 12. I hope for a good attendance, since we need to plan for the future of the Society and Museum.

As I keep getting another year older, the change was not welcome and my mind has wandered from my normal historic Facebook postings as I still having a hard time getting organized in the downsized office. But the worst news is that my 14-plus-year right hand volunteer Darrell Richers has announced his retirement in November of this year so other members of the Society will have to step up to carry out our mission.

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Speaking of retirement, I have no intention of running for President of the NLCHS in April 2022, as I feel another person should take the helm. But as long as my health permits, I will stay on as curator of the museum. It has been an exciting and rewarding 15-plus years to serve as President of this organization, as I have met so many people interested in history.

Hopefully this fall we can make progress on restoration of the Brush College bell tower and get lights on the flagpole at the War of 1812 Battlefield.

It has been an exciting ride as your President and as a member of NLCHS. I was involved with the saving of the three historic ATSF Depot structures and guess I'm looking forward to the return of AMTRAK to a facility that has withstood 121 years, being a new home for AMTRAK in Fort Madison, Iowa.

Thanks to all our volunteers, board members, general members and others that believe in preserving and sharing our area history.

L. D. "Andy" Andrews, president 2020-21

OUR FEATURED OLD HOUSE



(Photo Courtesy of Darrell Richers)

The July 6, 2021 edition of the *Fort Madison Daily Democrat* brought good news to local citizens: the Queen Anne-style house at 919 Avenue E, known as the Kretsinger house, was being restored! Although restoration work had begun decades ago, progress was slow and not noticeable from the outside. But a new owner who lives in Oregon has begun exterior work, as seen in the accompanying picture, and eventually the house should look much as it did when it was built back in 1893.

According to "A Driving Tour of Victorian Homes of Fort Madison, Iowa" by Dave Moehn (available at the museum): "Frederick S. Kretsinger was secretary and treasurer of the Iowa Farm and Tool Company when, in 1893, he built this very substantial frame Queen Anne home. It features both round and inset octagonal towers, decorative shingling and a two-story porch with classic columns."

Frederick Kretsinger's father William, a native of New York, organized the Iowa Farming Tool Company in 1874. He took advantage of the convict population of the state penitentiary in Fort Madison, employing 125 men in different departments. In 1895 Frederick became president of the company upon his father's death. He was also president of the Cattermole Library Board from its founding in 1894 to 1900. By 1907 he was no longer living in the Fort Madison house, and sold it in 1910 to John Bonicamp, proprietor of Bonicamp Manufacturing in Fort Madison.

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The Bonicamps lived in the house for a few years and sold it in 1914. It was sold twice within the year. It was purchased by Myrtle Johnston, Deputy Lee County Clerk, in December, 1917. Myrtle and her husband, Otto, the Lee County Clerk, lived at the residence for 30 years.

Several alterations appear to have occurred between 1913 and 1919, likely after the Johnstons acquired the property. By 1919 the house appears to have been subdivided into three units, occupied by Otto and Myrtle Johnston, Bertram and Bessie Selby, and Frederick and Gladys Hanchett. The Johnstons moved out in the late 1920s, but were back in 1931, with renters occupying the other two units.

Myrtle Johnston sold the property in 1945 to Alfred and Arvilla Benbow, who never lived at the property but continued to rent the apartments. Alfred was owner of the Benbow Coal Company, which had dated back three generations in his family.

In 2011 the owner of the house was quoted as saying that, since their purchase in 1999, they had been remodeling, replacing interior fixtures that had been removed and stored. They had replaced the roof, added some new windows and removed the two-story front porch, but had never moved into the residence. In fact, they were unsure if it could ever be reparable for habitation again.

Information for this article came from NLCHS records, the State Historical Society of Iowa's Site Inventory Form, the *Fort*

Madison Daily Democrat and "A Driving Tour of Victorian Homes of Fort Madison, Iowa" by Dave Moehn

IVANHOE PARK ONCE HAD A ZOO

From the book "Fort Madison/North Lee County Yesterday & Today", published by the *Fort Madison Daily Democrat*,
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Ivanhoe Park was built in 1887 as the western terminus of the Fort Madison Street Railway, which first used horse-drawn cars and later ran electric trolley cars on a line about four miles long from the Iowa State Penitentiary to what then was a point far west of the city.

Encompassing eight acres, the original plan called for two lakes with an elevated bandstand, reached by a catwalk, in the center of the larger lake.

Businessman J.B. Morrison and his associates developed the park, deciding that it would be a good thing for both his company and Santa Fe town – then the name for the area north of the railroad yards: a park of its own.

No ordinary park, this one boasted a small zoo with a bear, monkeys and other animals in cages.

A professional balloonist who went by the name Professor Kavanaugh used the park as a launching pad for his hot-air expeditions. Sailing into the sky about once a week, the professor and his canvas craft was a curious sight for those who came to the park.

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When the balloon failed to rise one day, however, the professor was dragged along on the ground. After breaking his leg this way, he became a house painter.

In addition to its other attractions, Ivanhoe Park in the late 19th century also featured a special trail for bicyclists.

As the years took their toll, the zoo was closed. The lakes were filled in and the trail fell into disuse.

A softball diamond was built where one of the lakes had once been, and the park was equipped with typical amenities – tennis courts, a playground, picnic facilities, a shelter house and restrooms.

Ivanhoe Park began a new life in 2000, when the city put \$18,000 into construction of an inline skating trail. The trail included places where skilled users could test their agility on ramps and other features.

Four students from Fort Madison Middle School, Michael Jennings, Josh Abbey, Paul “P.J.” Bartholomew and Kyle Doherty, lobbied for creation of a facility where they could skate legally, instead of constantly being chased away from other places for fear of property damage or other trouble.

The need for such a facility was discussed as early as 1976, when city officials recommended a skateboard park in a comprehensive development plan developed that year.

Design work on a skateboard park, using the concrete pad where the seldom-used tennis courts had been, began the next year.

Huffman Welding and Machine Inc. built special ramps for the facility based on standardized plans, allowing the project to be completed for about \$60,000.

The first Fort Madison Skateboard Rodeo, an event conducted in conjunction with the annual Tri-State Rodeo, was held in August 2002 and organizers hope the event will continue each year.

BRIDGE FACTS

(From the pamphlet “The Fort Madison Toll Bridge”, available at the museum)

Fort Madison has had two bridges spanning the Mississippi River. The first was completed in 1887. By the mid-1920s, with the increased weight of locomotives and rolling stock, the need for a new bridge was apparent. A new design added a track and separated the rail from the road traffic.

Work on the second (current) bridge began in April, 1925 and was completed by July, 1927 and cost \$5.5 million. It is widely considered the longest double-deck swing-span bridge in the world.

The swing span is driven by four independent 75 horsepower G.E. motors and a single brake. A typical opening for a tow with 15 barges will take 15 to 20 minutes; the length varies due to conditions. The longest

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opening was just over 21 hours. The nearest bridges are 20 to 25 miles on either side.

THANK YOU, VOLUNTEERS

Following are some pictures, taken by Cyndie Reppert and Robin Delaney, of the volunteers who undertook the massive task of moving our collections from one building to another. Thank you, volunteers; we couldn't have done it without you!



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HALLOWEEN PRANKS AND PARTIES

(From the book "A Fort Madison Chronicle with Aspects of North Lee County" by John Hansman)

Halloween pranks have been traditional in Fort Madison since the earliest days. Characteristically, young people roamed about on the evening of October 31 assuming the role of night goblins leaving a trail of soaped windows and corn thrown on house porches.

The word Halloween is a contraction of All Hallows Eve, October 31, which precedes the Christian festival of All Hallows' or All Saints' Day in which all saints of the church are honored.

The association of ghosts, witches and goblins frightening people is derived from the pre-Christian pagan beliefs that this was the one night of the year the dead and other unnatural creatures were most likely to roam about.

An article in the *Fort Madison Democrat* in 1879 described what the boys were up to in the community on Halloween that year:

"They spread destruction and disorder wherever they went. Gates were misplaced, signs changed, (wooden) sidewalks torn up, buggies and wagons run into inaccessible and unaccountable places, dry goods boxes fired in the streets, hung up effigies, and the dickens was to pay generally."

A Halloween party at Fort Madison High School in 1909 included 16 "queerly costumed boys and girls" presenting a "fantastic rendering of the Virginia Reel," songs sung by "human voices issuing from the grinning mouths of grotesque pumpkin faces" and a supper served by girls dressed as witches.

A one-time favorite prank of local "Halloweeners" was to overturn wooden outhouses that sat at the rear of nearly every house in Fort Madison before the town's water and sewer systems were installed. Stories circulated of some of the privies being toppled with an unsuspecting occupant inside.

On one occasion in 1916, a privy was overturned in the east end of the city. Later that night, the elderly gentleman who lived on the property, and did not see well, walked out in the dark to his outhouse and fell into the hole where the building was supposed to be.

As local residents installed indoor plumbing, outhouses became increasingly rare, so that by 1924 the *Evening Democrat* noted Halloween revelers no doubt lamented their passing.

In 1926, police were asked to take fingerprints from a privy toppled in the West End, but did not do so because they had "no set of fingerprints of small boys on file."

The picket fences that surrounded many local homes were especially prone to vandalism at

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Halloween. In 1923, the *Democrat* noted that when a lady in the West End caught several boys prying the pickets from her fence, she demanded they nail them back. But since they were too small to do it, a man in the neighborhood volunteered his services.

Other popular pranks of earlier years included the throwing of metal park benches into the pond at Central Park; placing a cow (then often kept in town) on the front porch of a prominent local resident; and elevating buggies to some rooftops.

Tick-tacking was also popular. This practice involved the cutting of spaced notches in the top and bottom rims of wooden thread spools and winding a string around the spool. When the spool, held by a long nail was pressed against a house window or door, the string was pulled, thus causing a “tick-tack” sound as it spun.

Other favorite pranks included soaping windows and throwing shelled corn on porches.

Before 1930, when streetcars still operated in town, the iron tracks were sometimes greased around Halloween. This caused wheels of such cars to slip, preventing further passage. Streetcar drivers often carried a bucket of sand for covering greasy spots during the Halloween week.

Occasionally, when caught, Halloween pranksters were ordered to attend mayor’s court with their parents. In 1945, for example, eight young children accused of

throwing tomatoes on a porch in the West End, appeared before the mayor who gave them a stern warning over their behavior, but imposed no fine.

The practice of Beggars’ Night, where children go door-to-door to “beg” for candy and other treats, began locally in 1924. This Halloween custom derives from the pagan ritual followed in ancient Rome of giving nuts and apples to visitors during the Roman Festival of Pomona held about November 1. The term “trick or treat” began to be used in Fort Madison during the 1950s.

In 1944, the Junior Chamber of Commerce organized the first “Halloween Howl”, for local children, held on October 31 at the old Eagles Club on Avenue H, partly to discourage acts of vandalism. The party was free, with games and treats, and has been repeated most years by various sponsors.

A Beggars’ Night Carnival at Fort Madison High School with door prizes, costume judging, a haunted house and other features began in 1987 with the charge for the haunted house going to charity.

In later years, the number of children going door-to-door on Beggars’ Night decreased through parental safety concerns, but special merchant giveaways in the well-lighted business district increased.



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BRICKMAKING IN FORT MADISON (From the book “Fort Madison, A Pictorial History” by Ted Sloat)

Brickmaking was an important industry during the city’s growing years. One of the most industrious brickmakers was John Reichelt whose kiln was near the top of Burlington Hill.

Reichelt, his wife and five small children came to Fort Madison from Germany in 1856. Struggling to learn English and keep his family together, he purchased some cattle and began to farm. By the end of the Civil War, he was able to purchase 80 acres.

With two of his sons old enough to help, he began making brick, using a crude horse-powered mud mill which he bought for \$10. In the first year, he made 35,000 bricks and sold most of them in Fort Madison. The city, like most of the country, was experiencing a revitalization after the war. Like other brickyards here, Reichelt produced brick for St. Mary’s Church, the Baptist Church and scores of residences then under construction.

Following his death in 1876, his sons continued to run the yard and invented the “Reichelt Rotary Press” which they advertised as having the capacity of making 1,000 to 1,500 bricks per hour with horse power and 1,500 to 2,000 with steam.

The Reichelt method made a brick with holes in it, enabling the brick to be handled with forks, thus avoiding finger marks.

Most of the clay used in the brickmaking was obtained from the area. The industry waned when builders began to import brick of better quality. Local brickmaking slipped into history around the turn of the century, leaving abandoned brick kilns that stood for years as memorials to the vanished industry.

EARLY LOCAL PHOTOGRAPHERS (From the book “Fort Madison, A Pictorial History” by Ted Sloat)

Probably the best-known photographer in Fort Madison during the 1880s was Joseph R. Tewksbury. He established a photographic gallery in the 500 block of Avenue H in 1876.

Another popular photographer in the 1880s was Emil Dassau, who was also a house painter and competent artist. Dassau was also noted for his orchestra which furnished music for roller rinks, dances, weddings, picnics and other gatherings. Among members of Dassau’s orchestra was an old-country Bohemian by the name of Pesel. Pesel, who wore earrings and tied a silk handkerchief over his bald head, played clarinet. He often caused intermission to be somewhat longer than planned when he filled his nostrils with snuff and had to honk it out before Dassau could give the downbeat.

Dassau, who prided himself on his musical talent, was once heard to say, “Fort Madison has many fiddle players but only one ‘violinist’ and I am he.”