



Washtenaw Impressions

NOVEMBER, 1974

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

On November the 27th, the WHS will be celebrating the 117th anniversary of the original call "for a County Convention for the purpose of forming a County Historical Society." It was on the 17th--the third Thursday in December--in 1857 that the convention took place in the old county courthouse and the Washtenaw County Historical Society was founded. On the 19th--the third Thursday in December--in 1974, we'll celebrate our founding with the unveiling of a very special surprise which dates prior to 1857. This is the night of our Christmas party, of course, and I can think of no better occasion to celebrate our "SURPRISE". I am being very mysterious, I know, but our Christmas surprise will thrill everyone who has ever been interested in the history of this area. I hope to see every member and friend of the Historical Society at our 1974 Christmas Party.

Our negotiations for the mill site on Geddes Road are proceeding as scheduled. I will keep you informed on all developments.

CHRISTMAS PARTY DECEMBER 19

Santa is coming to the annual Washtenaw Historical Society Christmas party at 8 p.m. Thursday, December 19, in Liberty Hall, Ann Arbor Federal Savings, Liberty and Division, Ann Arbor. Please bring a small gift to exchange.

CALENDAR

Dexter Historical Society--
8 p.m. Thursday, November 21,
at Wylie School Cafeteroium.
Slides of historic downtown
Ann Arbor buildings by Profs.
Kingsbury Marzolf and Gerhard
Olving of the University College
of Architecture and Design. Bruce
Waggoner will show slides of
historic Dexter buildings. Pro-
gram co-sponsored by Dexter
Chamber of Commerce. Open
to public.

Saline Historical Society--
8 p.m. Tuesday, November 19,
Saline High School Cafeteria.
Regular business meeting.
Hosting Genealogy section of
Washtenaw Historical Society
2:30 p.m. Sunday, November 17,
same place. Open to public.

Ypsilanti Historical Society--
Annual Christmas Party, 2-5 p.m.
Sunday, December 8, at Museum,
220 N. Huron Street (next to
City Hall). Musical program with
carol singing, refreshments. Dis-
play of doll houses arranged by
Mrs. George Bird. Museum will
be decorated in the Victorian
manner. Open to public.

GENEALOGY SECTION MEETS

The Genealogy Section of
the Washtenaw Historical Society
planned to meet at 2:30 p.m.
Sunday, November 17, at the
Saline High School Cafeteria, as
guests of the new Saline Area
Historical Society.

A discussion of ways of going
about pursuing family trails, led
by Dr. and Mrs. William F. Bender,
was planned.

MUNCYS TO SPEAK AT SUNDAY MEETING

Both Ralph and Lydia Muncy
will speak on "Educational Devel-
opments in America" at 3 p.m.
Sunday, November 24, in Liberty
Hall at Ann Arbor Federal Savings
& Loan, Liberty and Division
Streets, Ann Arbor.

The Muncys, long-time
members of the Society, bring a
varied perspective to their topic.
Both have life teaching certificates
from the University of Michigan.
Lydia has taught in both one-room
schools and graded systems in her
30 year career. Ralph, who
majored in forestry and conservation
of natural resources, has used
his skills in various ways including
development of academic programs
for the Civilian Conservation Corps
(C.C.C.) during the depression of the
1930's.

In the Society, the Muncys
organized the Genealogy Section
last year. Mrs. Muncy also organized
a group interested in early crafts.
Both have been active in Sesquicen-
tennial activities in Ann Arbor.

Members please note: The
November meeting has been
planned for Sunday afternoon. If
you need a ride call Frank Everett
at 663-5723. He will arrange for
a fellow member to pick you up.
And bring a friend. Guests are
welcome.

CORRECTED COPIES

Corrected copies of the
October issue of "The Impressions"
which was bedeviled by gremlins
will be available to those who
would like them. Please call
Alice Ziegler, 663-8826, and we
will arrange to send you one.

CIRCUS IN U.S. BEGAN AS ONE-RING SHOW IN 1793

by Stuart Thayer

Included among those institutions that crossed the Atlantic from England fully grown is that of the circus. It came to America via a Scotsman, John Bill Ricketts, who emigrated in 1792 to establish a riding school in Philadelphia. In the month of April, 1793 he opened the first true circus in America on the same spot, the southwest corner of Market and Twelfth Streets. In referring to this as the first true circus I am defining the genre as a multi-act performance, i. e. one having several performers each of whom did a different presentation. In addition to Ricketts' own riding this first program included his brother, Francis, as an acrobat; a rope-dancer by the name of Spinacuta and a clown, M. McDonald. There was even an apprentice, a boy named Strobach, who stood on Ricketts' shoulders in a riding act called "Flying Mercury".

The presentation of equestrian feats had been accomplished as far back as Roman times and saddled riding, such as Ricketts offered, was seen in America as early as 1771. But it was Ricketts who combined various types of entertainment that had theretofore been seen individually in this country. He was able to do this, I would hypothesize, because he had experience of it in England where he had performed for Charles Hughes at the Royal Circus near Blackfriar's Bridge. Also, he could afford the cost of the building in which the entertainment was presented.

The actual development of what we, and Ricketts, call the circus was accomplished by Philip Astley, a former dragoon whose riding ability so astonished onlookers at his riding school in Lambeth that he fenced off his yard and began charging admission. In a short time he added other types of entertainers, the same sort that Ricketts had, and so became what historians refer to as the father of the circus. This was in the year 1769, according to most sources.

Ricketts' building in Philadelphia was wooden, probably circular, since subsequent ones definitely were, and was centered by the circle, what we

call the ring. The audience either stood in the pit area surrounding the ring or sat on benches in the boxes which were raised three or four feet above the level of the ground. At this time it is our belief that the arena was open to the sky.

This beginning effort was quite successful. Ricketts played for four months in Philadelphia and then moved to New York where he performed for another three months. He quite possibly anticipated his success since he knew of that of his English predecessors, but certainly the fact that his was the first such entertainment offered in this country must not be overlooked.

Let us take a moment to describe what we know of the performances in those early years. Rope-dancing was as advanced then as it is now, assuming that the feats advertised were performed. The only turn that is done now that was not done then is the somersault. Of the clown's contribution we know very little. It was largely vocal, the hall being small and all parts of it easily reached by the human voice. Acrobatics of a type that might be termed unusual were often reserved to the clown rather than the more formal tricks done by the acrobat himself. Tying one's feet together and then doing flipflaps is an example; an acrobat would consider such an act beneath him. What the acrobat did offer was what is called today a "carpet act" from the later practise of spreading a bit of carpet on the ground to prevent dirtying the costumes. Cartwheels, somersaults, leaps over various objects and through others, such as hoops and hogsheads, was the standard fare. All this was secondary, however, to the principal attraction, the equestrian acts.

We must remember that the people viewing the circus program of that time all owned, rode, stabled and fed horses so they were very aware of them. They appreciated well broken ones and were familiar with

LOCAL HISTORIC PRINT TABLE MATS NOW ON SALE

How would you like to eat your porridge off a copy of an 1874 print of "Henry Binder's Orchestration Hall", corner of Main and Liberty?

Through the generous contribution of Mrs. Henry Sicinski and others this is now possible. Mrs. Sicinski had four prints from the "New Historical Atlas of Washtenaw County, Michigan" (1874) photographed and made into attractive, washable table mats. The mats are for sale and all proceeds will be given to the museum fund of the Washtenaw County Historical Society.

How did Mrs. Sicinski get involved with turning rare book prints into table mats? Her interest in history developed as she was growing up in Norfolk, Va., not only seeing many historic sites but also hearing those tales from "The War" about how the silver was buried to save it from the Yankees.

Later when she married and set up house-keeping in Ann Arbor, she became an antique collector. Along the way she acquired a copy of the 1874 atlas and became interested in locating the sites of many of the structures pictured.

She also used the atlas to help her daughter's sixth-grade class at Newport School with a Sesquicentennial project. With it she verified the location of James Allen's farm within the Newport School district.

CIRCUS (cont.)

refer to P.T. Barnum, James A. Bailey, Adam Forepaugh and the Ringling Brothers, names that may be familiar to you. It was in this period that the noun circus became a descriptive adjective; when the hyperbole of advertising and the uninhibited claims of grandeur tried to evoke a mysterious and alien wonder in the minds of the populace and largely succeeded.

In time the automobile, the radio and the motion picture intruded to the extent that the circus became just another of several ways to spend one's entertainment dollar and gradually the genre was reduced to a child's entertainment which it seems to remain to this day.

Stuart Thayer of Thayer-Innis Insurance Agency devotes much of his spare time to circus history. He is president of the Circus History Association, a national group of 1,200 members, and is writing a book on the subject.

A friend, W.E. Britton, photographed the print of the Allen farm in the atlas and Xerox Corp. printed several hundred copies for distribution in the school. It was so successful she thought others would like to have prints from the atlas during the Sesquicentennial year.

Having seen and used mats with historic prints on them, Mrs. Sicinski decided that this was the most attractive way to make the prints available. With the cooperation of William Nuffer of Litho Crafters, Inc., she had plates made of four prints. Mr. Nuffer chose "Birds Eye View of Delhi Mills" which gives in great detail every industry and home in the village. Mrs. Sicinski chose the others because of certain associations with the scenes.

The second print, "Ann Arbor Steam Planing Mill", corner of North and Fifth Streets in Ann Arbor, is the building which has been made into Kerrytown II. The mill was owned by Luick Brothers & Co. and Mrs. Sicinski counts among her friends Mr. Waldo Luick who has told her many stories about old Ann Arbor.

The third print of the "Washtenaw County Poor House & Insane Asylum" interested her because of her background in hospital work as a nurse-anesthetist. The area behind the "Poor House" (site of the Washtenaw County Farm) is still used for Project Grow gardens.

The last one is a combination of prints of two buildings which have vanished—an interior view of Henry Binder's Orchestration Hall, where the Hutzel Building now stands, and a view of the rich Second Empire style architecture of the City Market, which stood on the corner of Fourth and Washington Streets.

Edwards Letter Shop, Inc., reproduced the prints in a sepia tone. Ulrich's donated the laminating materials and the work was done with the cooperation of Mrs. Joyce Keith of the Graphics Department of the Ann Arbor Public School Administration Office.

The table mats, available in sets of four, may be ordered directly from Mrs. Sicinski (769-3726). Each table mat is \$2.50, or \$10 for four. Some prints have been left un-laminated and are \$1.50 each.

The mats will be for sale at the next Historical Society meeting. They also may be purchased at Hutzel's Apparel Shop, Finishing Touch Antiques Shop, London Flower Shop, Kitchen Port, and Ruth Roy Interiors.

Washtenaw
Historical Society
Meeting
Sunday November 24, 1974
3:00 P.M.
LIBERTY HALL
ANN ARBOR FEDERAL SAVINGS
LIBERTY AT DIVISION

Non-Profit Org.
U. S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 96
Ann Arbor, Mich.

PASS NEWSLETTER ON

How about passing your copy of "The Impressions" on to a friend and inviting him or her to join the Society?

The fall membership drive is underway and the help of Society members would be appreciated. The coupon, a duplicate of the membership card, may be mailed to Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Lacy, 1832 Vinewood Blvd., Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104.

THE WASHTENAW HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Date _____

I wish to apply for _____ membership in
the Washtenaw Historical Society.

(Dues for active individual membership are \$3.00; for husband and wife \$5.00
and \$50.00 for life membership.)

My check is enclosed.

Name _____ Phone _____

Address _____

Interest or Occupation _____

Mr. and Mrs. Thomas F. Lacy, 1832 Vinewood Blvd. Ann Arbor, Michigan