

Ridge Historical Society

Newsletter

JUNE - JULY, 2002

10621 SEELEY AVENUE • CHICAGO, ILL. 60643 • (773) 881-1675 •

GENE DELVES, PRESIDENT

COMING ATTRACTIONS

Friday, June 7: GARDEN DAY — Installation of landscaping with Greencorps Staff and Horticulturalists: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. A minimum of 10 volunteers needed at all times.

Saturday, June 8, 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.: Landscape installation continues. To offer help, leave message at 881-1675 for Joyce Black.

Saturday & Sunday, June 8 & 9, 11 a.m. to 5 p.m.: TOUR Isle a la Cache, Romeoville: Mike Stachnik invites interested parties to the 19th annual Island Rendezvous and encampment. It is a great family outing.

Wed. June 12: RHS Board Meeting, 7:30 p.m.

REOPENING PARTY, 11th Street Station: Date still uncertain — probably a Friday evening in June from 6 to 7 p.m. RHS has approval to host this event.

Wednesday, July 17, 7:30 p.m.: A REPRISÉ of the PAUL PETRAITIS LECTURE *Geology of the Ridge*.

Saturdays & Sundays, June 21 & 22 and June 28 & 29, 9 a.m. to 3 p.m.: BOOK SALE

(Please make phone appointment to deliver book donations after June 13. (773) 881-1675.

The Ridge Attracts its First Settlers

The nationwide Panic of 1837 that bankrupted the State of Illinois and halted construction of the I&M Canal dragged on well into the 1840s and cut short a three year real estate boom in Cook County.

Land speculation in Chicago began when frontier entrepreneur Gurdon Hubbard successfully interested some east coast investors during a trip to New York in 1834. By the time the Chicago branch of the U.S. Land Office opened in May, 1835, lots were being snapped up at a remarkable pace throughout the county. Though U.S. title to these former Indian lands had been secured by treaty by 1833, local tribes had until the summer of 1835 to vacate their property. This didn't keep investors from buying up choice parcels from Thornton to Wilmette. Of course, high wooded ground was deemed especially valuable, and this made the Ridge quite popular, with the first sales being recorded as early as March, 1835.

To paraphrase historian Bessie Louise Pierce, "Whence had come these seekers of fortune who were to weave

so intricate a design of life on a ridge near the shores of Lake Michigan?"

The first purchasers of land on the Ridge were decidedly a mixed bag including an Irish doctor, a West Point graduate, a Hoosier, Chicago's first lawyer and a plethora of Yankees from New York to Connecticut.

As part of the current *Pioneers of the Ridge* exhibit, co-curator Linda Lamberty had plotted all the holdings of the original landowners of the northern half of the Ridge. Some surnames like Lane, Morgan and Barnard are familiar. Here are some of the others who were the first owners of significant parcels.

Taking advantage of their preemption rights, DeLafayette Wilcox and Alvin Noyes Gardiner registered their parcels on March 29 and April 10 respectively, weeks before they officially went on sale. Wilcox, a soldier at Ft. Dearborn, picked up 80 acres at 11th and California while fellow Chicagoan Gardiner bought 160 acres between 87th and 91st Streets, west of Wood. There is every indication that he lived here, which makes him our first landowning resident. It is also likely that Rexford's original Blue Island House Hotel, the first commercial structure built on the Ridge, was here on Gardiner's property.

On May 5, Julianne Connor and Moses Gerrard bought land west and south of the Gardiner property. Of Connor, who bought 80 acres on the SE corner of 87th and Western we know nothing, but more is known of Gerrard.

He bought 80 acres bounded by Damen, Wood, 91st to 95th, and was living on his land when he sold it to Thomas Morgan in 1844. Rather than relocate, he stayed on the Ridge and worked for the family. It was on the former Gerrard property that the Morgans built their home. Gerrard later moved to southern Illinois.

In June of 1835, Town Clerk of Chicago Ebenezer Peck bought three quarter sections bordering 95th

In the Cool of the Evening: The veranda of Driscoll House is the setting for an evening of history, champagne and sweets on the third Wednesdays of each month starting July 17th. Paul Petraitis will reprise his ground-breaking Pioneer Lecture Series. The opening program, July 17, will address *The Underground Railroad on the South Side*. Then on August 21 it will be *Historic Maps: A Hands-on Workshop*. Enjoy cool and interesting evenings on the veranda of Driscoll House.

and Western and totaling 480 acres of prime real estate. A native of Portland, Maine, he later worked with DeWitt Lane on Chicago's first railroad line, the Chicago and Galena RR.

Though DeWitt Lane reportedly had a cabin near 102nd and Seeley as early as the Fall, 1832, he was only a squatter, moving west on 115th Street in 1834 to purchase property on what became known as Lanes Island. It was brother Durastus Lane who purchased property June 27, 1835: the 160 acres bounded by Western, Damen, 103rd and 107th, where later was located Ridge Country Club. Lane's brother-in-law, Levi Baxter, purchased the southeast corner of 103rd and Western on that same day. Later that month, Judge John Blackstone, a circuit rider, picked up 720 acres of the Ridge between 95th and 115th, making him one of the largest landowners in the area.

Also in June, Chicago's first attorney, Russell E. Heacock, bought 160 acres along Western Avenue from 11th to 119th. Born in Connecticut, Heacock arrived in Chicago in 1827 and in addition to property in Chicago and on the Ridge, he owned considerable acreage in Bridgeport.

The property that Ridge Historical Society occupies straddles land purchased by Durastus Lane (top of the hill) and Jirah Rowley (on the Longwood side). Interestingly, Rowley's purchase, dated March 15, 1837, would be the last piece of land bought on the Ridge for seven years. That Spring, the speculative bubble broke, and if it hadn't been for the deep pockets of Chicago Mayor William Ogden, and a timely Government contract to build a harbor at Chicago, the newly chartered city (March 4) might have lost its good credit rating. At the depths of the depression specie payment (paper money) and regular banking stopped altogether at Chicago. In 1840 and 1841, Chicago actually lost population as the former flood of immigration into Cook County dwindled to a trickle.

Symptomatic of the return of the economy was the appearance of Thomas Morgan who began buying property on the Ridge (likely at bargain prices) including the second-to-last Government parcel available, just south of 107th and Longwood. The last bit of former Indian Lands was picked up by Alice L. Barnard on December 1, 1849.

by Paul Petraitis

For more information on land purchases and other fascinating details of life in pioneer times, check out the Ridge Historical Society exhibit and make a point to attend the continuing lecture series by Pioneer Exhibit co-curator, Paul Petraitis.

Ridge Historical Society can use

Your Donations of

Garden tools you no longer need: trowels, clippers, loppers.

Loose leaf notebook binders with plastic sleeve on the back rib to be used in archiving paper materials.

Photos of family activities which speak of a definite era; of community events, of business areas, etc. RHS receives frequent "nostalgia requests" for such things as 95th Street in the 1940s. Pictures of Scout groups and of child and youth activities showing changes in

uniforms or fashions. Neighborhood scenes show changes in landscape and neighboring houses in the background.

Modern means of copying often allow RHS to make a copy and return the original to the person who loaned it. Please include identification of persons pictured, the site of photography and approximate date; but don't write on the back of glossy photographs! RHS also welcomes stories of area families.

BOOKS, CDs and Cassettes for the 2002 book sale.

This event was highly successful last year featuring books on history, art, Chicago, cooking and children's books. Please phone Kate Eaton, 233-9806, the Delves, 445-5806 or leave a message at Ridge Historical Society, 773-881-1675, to arrange a convenient time for drop off or pick up.

YOUR TIME for these types of tasks:

- (1) A keeper of the RHS Activities Binder. This volunteer would assemble photos, newspaper clippings and write-ups about program and social events at Driscoll House to be put into a binder; in other words, keeping track of RHS history.
- (2) A Serials Librarian to bring orderly organization to the periodicals, newspapers and other print material that comes to RHS.
- (3) Library Cataloging -- an experienced library cataloger to assist in determining Library of Congress numbers for books in the RHS collection.

Keller School Art Class Visits RHS

Ridge Historical Society crackled with excitement as 30+ bright and enthusiastic kids viewed RHS exhibits and two large tables of historic artifacts. These included various candlesticks, a 19th century family bible, two 20th century electric toasters, wearing apparel and



much more. The youngsters not only learned something of daily life in years past but were encouraged to view the items with an artist's eye, seeing form, contrast, color.

On a brief walking tour in the neighborhood their attention was called to natural history and architecture in the neighborhood. For these students history was viewed anew, sketched, rubbed, questioned and brought to life.



Mrs. Kitner and her 6th Grade Keller School class during a learning experience at Ridge Historical Society

Photograph by Paul Petrattis

President Cites RHS Needs

This is only my second Newsletter greeting to you as your president, and right off the bat we are going to have to talk about money. We will no longer have rental income from the two second floor Longwood Drive-facing rooms because we really need that space for Ridge Historical Society purposes. The plan is to use those two rooms for costume exhibit space and work area. The present costume room will become the library and research area where materials will be more available.

To replace rental income we are working on a number of fund raising events, like a grand reopening celebration and reception at the beautifully restored 111th Street Metra station, the traveling Chicago Bungalow exhibit which we will have from mid-August through September; another book sale and something called the "Fame" video. You will be more fully informed about these events as plans develop. In addition to these one-shot fundraisers, we plan to institute an Annual Fund, as most other museums do, and also get moving on a planned-giving program.

We owe a great big "thank you" to Eileen Klees who has devoted many hours to preparing an application to the National Endowment for the Humanities for a Challenge Grant that would supply funds for (1) archival storage, (2) additional man-hours to archive the collection and (3) enhancement of the Architectural Resource Center. If received favorably, RHS will need to launch a big finance campaign to raise matching funds.

In closing I want to call your attention to the wonderful Greencorps Chicago gardening project for which Joyce Black and Carol Belshaw are working with volunteers from the Morgan Park Junior Woman's Club. This will give the property a splendid new look, with flowers lining the driveway approach from Seeley. Thank you, Joyce and Carol and all the volunteers; especially Project Director Martie Brennan and Landscape Architect Wendy Schulenberg. A \$1200 donation from Joyce and Mel Black enabled the project to begin

properly with a thorough removal of very old shrubs and old weed trees. The work was done by Bob Filipak of The Gnawing Edge, which included grinding roots below the ground. His business cards and our recommendation are available at RHS. I also call your attention to landscaping work to be done on the north hillside, funded by a generous grant from Lori and Ed McGunn to whom RHS extends a large measure of thanks.

---Gene Delves

Fingerprints as Evidence Pioneered on the Ridge

by Harold T. Wolff

The Beverly/Morgan Park area was somehow excluded from Chicago's reputation as a crime center during the prohibition era. Nevertheless, one east Beverly residence played a role in validation of a technique of detection -- fingerprint evidence.

Board Member Linda Lamberty found the story in author J. H. Taylor's "Finger-Print Evidence," a Government Printing Office pamphlet of 1922. Realizing its relevance to local history she gave it to RHS. One of the cases described therein is the Jennings case.

In 1910 the Clarence B. Hiller family lived at what is now 1837 W. 104th, the southeast corner of 104th and Hale. The Hillers were separated from their neighbors to the east, the Pickenses, by a vacant lot, and from two houses on the south by their own back yard. One of these was occupied by the McNabbs.

The front door of the Hiller house opens to a hallway leading to a stairway to the second floor. The bedroom nearest the head of the stairs was occupied by daughter Florence Hiller, age 13. The next bedroom was that of Clarice Hiller, 15, and beyond that was the bedroom of Mr. and Mrs. Hiller and their two younger children.

At the head of the stairs, near the door to Florence's room, a gas night light was kept burning.

Soon after 2 a.m., Monday, September 19, Mrs. Hiller awakened and noticed the light was out. She roused her husband and he arose and encountered an intruder at the head of the stairway. They grappled and both fell to the foot of the stairs where Hiller was fatally shot twice.

Shortly before the shooting, Clarice had seen the form of a man at her doorway holding a lighted match. She was not frightened because her father would frequently get up at night to check on the children.

The man disappeared and she heard footsteps, shuffling toward the room of her sister Florence, after which she heard Florence make a little sound, her father moving through the hallway, the struggle and then the shooting.

Florence had been awakened by something on her bed which she supposed was her little brother. She asked, "Is that you, Gerald?" When there was no reply she asked, "Who is this?" and a man's voice answered, "It's me."

She later testified she tried to scream but was unable to do so. The man placed his prickly cheek on her face. Then the stranger hurried out and encountered her father. None of the family had actually seen the face of the intruder.

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DATED MATERIAL — FIRST CLASS MAIL



The neighboring Pickens family was awakened by the screams of Mrs. Hiller and the children and John Pickens ran to the Hiller house. His son, Oliver Pickens, had been on the north side and had returned home by train, disembarking at 103rd Street. He was walking home when he heard the screams, ran to the Hiller house where he encountered a police officer seeking the source of the screams. These three were admitted to the house by daughter Clarice and they found the body of Mr. Hiller.

Meanwhile four police officers who had just gone off duty were sitting on a bench at the northwest corner of 103rd and Vincennes where they were not easily seen. At 2:38 a.m. Thomas Jennings approached from the south. The officers spoke to him and noticed that he carried a revolver in his pocket. Consequently the

police searched him and took the loaded weapon. They did not know of the murder, but they noticed he was perspiring, saw fresh blood on his clothing and a fresh wound above his left wrist. At 3:30 a.m. he was examined at the police station by two doctors (Clement and Springer) who found a fresh bullet wound on his arm.

The Hiller house had recently been painted and a back porch railing had the imprint of four fingers of a left hand.

Jennings' fingerprints were on record from a previous stay in the penitentiary. The porch railing prints and those on record matched.

There was an attempt to prevent the use of the prints as evidence as such use had not previously been passed on by American courts. The judge allowed it to be admitted. Jennings was put to death February 16, 1912.

*Pass this NewsLetter along to a friend
with the suggestion that
he or she also become a member*