

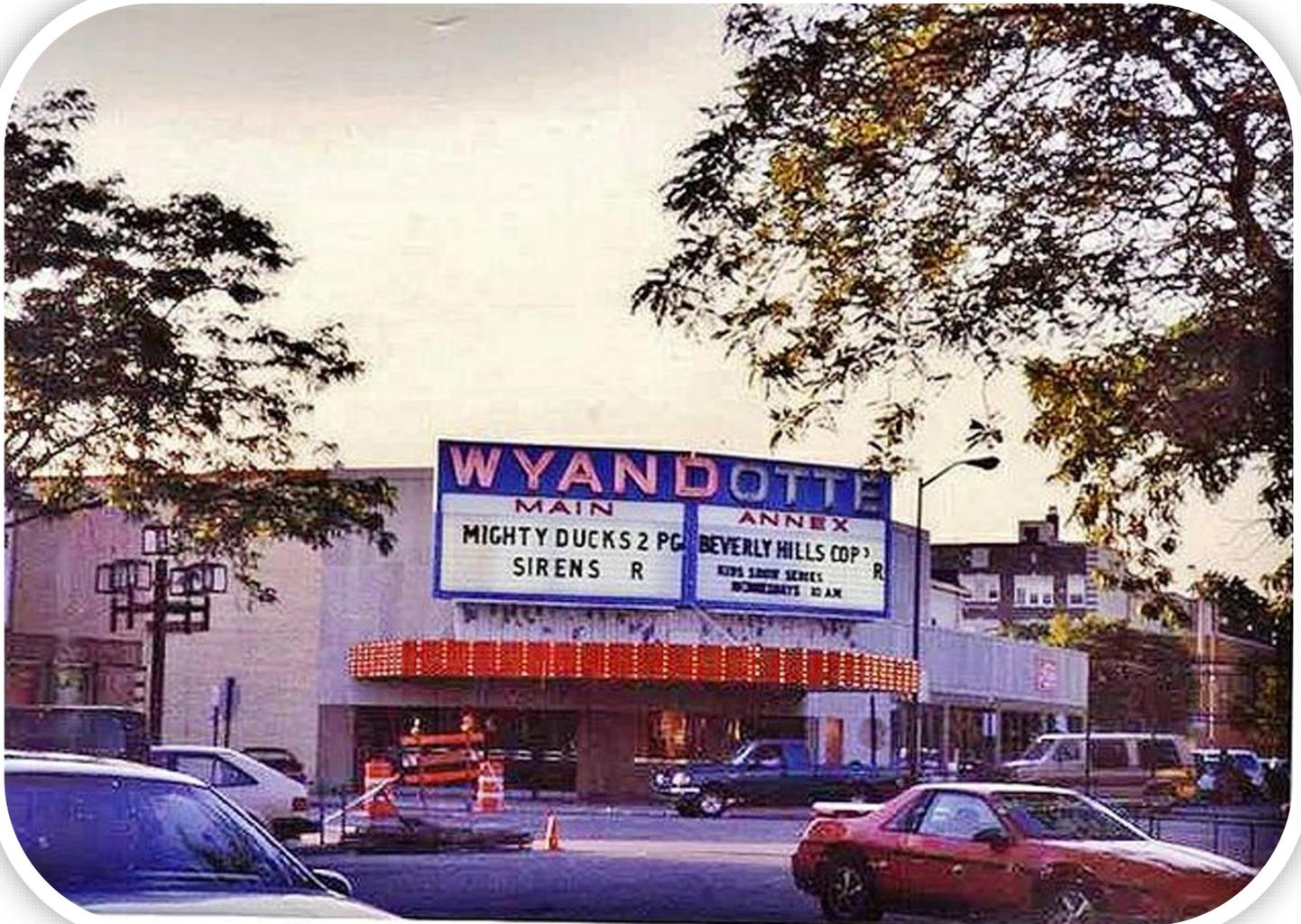
- EST. 1958 -

WYANDOTTE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

MONTHLY NEWSLETTER

APRIL 2021

VOLUME 4



Movie Houses Were Magical Places

Do you remember when going to the movies was the only way to see a new film? Now we have cable, Netflix, and yes even “home movie theatres” in the ultimate new home designs. But do they truly capture the excitement and magic of going to theatres in their heyday?

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MESSAGE FROM THE PREZ

Dear Members of the Historical Society,

2021 is the year that I am looking at reforming our historical society. It is time to bring us forward with new ideas in preserving our local history.

I am in the process of streamlining our existing committees and creating new ones focusing on delivering value. The Newsletter and Website Committees have already been combined.

We need to continue improving our local history programs in our public schools. We are very proud of our school board enabling Wyandotte History classes in our high school and now it's time to look into helping the elementary school. I am looking for members who wish to help with this initiative.

I am also looking for members to lend assistance to Jesse Rose, the Museum Director, with the collections process when needed.

Dear members our work is endless. Your donations are so helpful and allow us to improve the services we provide to you and the community. I am looking forward to seeing you through the year.

Best Regards,

Making History!

Be sure and read the article on page 5. It was written by Tatiana Cosme, an 11-year old, the youngest writer ever for our newsletters!

Jane (Gies) Rasmussen

ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL

New Principal



In the midst of all the chaos and confusion in 2020, Roosevelt High School named a new Principal. Benjamin Reynolds was named only the 8th principal in school history, taking over for Tom Kell, who retired after a decorated career.

Mr. Reynolds has been working for the district since 2003, has served as a teacher at Wilson Middle School, and was the Vice Principal under Mr. Kell. I was recently able to talk to him about the importance of recognizing the 100th Anniversary of RHS and his role and he said:

"I am very humbled to have the opportunity to lead RHS in the upcoming years. As a history teacher myself, I understand the value in recognizing the proud tradition of this building. I am looking forward to working with the various organizations like the Historical Society and Commission to bring about public knowledge about the anniversary of RHS. We have a great opportunity to highlight the fact that many high schools in this area do not have buildings that have the rich history that Roosevelt offers."

Mr. Reynolds went on to say that if anyone has any questions of himself or would like to have any input they can email him at reynolb@wy.k12.mi.us.

George Purdu

Museum Welcomes New Assistant

By now, most of you may have heard the former Museum Assistant, Natalie Pantelis, has chosen to depart from her role in Wyandotte and focus on her career with the Detroit Historical Society. While we all wish Natalie much luck and all the best in her role in Detroit, we would also like to welcome Audrey Wicklander, as the new Museum Assistant.

Currently residing in Melvindale, Audrey states she "has Wyandotte to thank for her love of history." Prior to moving to Riverview for high school, Audrey was raised in Wyandotte at 7th and Antoine. She lovingly recalls riding her bike to the Bacon Library for the summer book club and how much she loved the building itself, along with its sister across the street, the Ford-MacNichol Home. Her parents helped further her growing adoration for history by taking Audrey and her brother to various museums, such as The Henry Ford Museum and Greenfield Village. Growing up, history remained her favorite subject.

Before beginning her volunteer work at the Wyandotte Museum last summer, Audrey obtained her Bachelors of Science Degree in Cultural Geography with a minor in Historic Preservation, and is now one year into her Masters in Historic Preservation with a concentration on Heritage Interpretation and Museum Studies. She plans to graduate from Eastern Michigan University in April 2022.

When thinking about her volunteer work and future as the Wyandotte Museums assistant, Audrey feels as though, "if I were to give my time to help any organization, it would be for the town that jump-started my love of history." She hopes to remain in the southeastern Michigan area where she can "help preserve its stories and educate others on its unique history."

Audrey would love to hear from you! Feel free to stop in the office, call 734-324-7284 or email museum@wyandottemi.gov.



Movie Houses Were Magical Places

The movies brought the magic of Hollywood to small towns across America. Even from blocks away, the bright illumination of a theater's marquee created an air of excited anticipation.

Once seated in the auditorium, ticket-holders left their troubles behind. They eagerly lost themselves in a world where dastardly villains preyed on widows and orphans, tough guys in fat ties and fedoras meet long legged dames, space aliens blasted cities with death rays, and cowboys rode off into the sunset.

Before 1907, theaters offered live stage performances. In Wyandotte, the place to go was the Marx Opera House.

After that time, "photo plays" or moving pictures were added to their programs. Wyandotte had about a dozen movie houses in the 20th century, including the Gem, New Star and the Vaudette. Most were in business only a few years.

Three of Wyandotte's theaters operated for many years and are well remembered: the Majestic, the Rialto, and the Wyandotte.

The Majestic opened on the east side of Biddle between Maple and Sycamore in 1916 with the showing of the silent film "The Whirl of Life." A pipe organ added lively background music and acoustic exclamation points to the soundless film.

In this photo from 1941, the titles of two Abbott and Costello comedies are displayed on the theater's marquee. Five boys stand near the bicycle, a patrolman walks by, and a ticket agent is in the booth. The Federal Department Store in the background is now Wyandotte City Hall.



Built as a combination movie and vaudeville theater, the Majestic had a mahogany paneled lobby with mural paintings that led to the 1,200-seat auditorium. Lamps covered with silk shades were mounted on the walls. A stage for live performances was below the viewing screen. Dressing rooms were in the basement, and a mezzanine contained several box seats.

At its opening, the Majestic made a point of boasting of wide stairways and exit doors "in case of a panic." This reference may have been prompted by a tragedy only three years earlier. A stampede in a hall in Calumet, Michigan had killed 74 people, mostly children.

Downriver never had such a disaster, but one day in 1925, the usual pre-dawn quiet of Wyandotte was shattered by the sound of a large boom. Two men had tossed a bomb at the front of the Majestic and sped away in an automobile. The crime was never solved.

Moviegoers left the theater not only with a sense of being entertained, but often with a complimentary dinner plate as well.

The Majestic closed in 1952 and the building was torn down in 1966.

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The second theater, the Rialto, opened in 1921 at the northwest corner of Biddle and Sycamore, the same spot as the old Marx Opera House. Vaudeville acts, school concerts, sing-a-longs and movies filled the bill. In 1929, the Rialto installed their new talking picture equipment.

In 1934 the Rialto relocated two blocks up Biddle Avenue, between Oak and Elm. It closed in 1952.

The Wyandotte Theatre opened in 1938 at Elm and First streets with a seating capacity of 1,500. That first program was a mix of the old and new. The billing included the showing of "Man's Castle," starring Spencer Tracy and Loretta Young, plus four vaudeville acts, a live orchestra, and an in person visit by the popular movie cowboy Tom Mix and his wonder horse Tony. All of this was available for the price of 25 cents for adults and 10 cents for children.

The theater would soon also host live appearances by the Three Stooges, and Ingagi, a large ape who was the inspiration for the movie King Kong.

The interior was decorated in a Wyandot Indian motif that was reflected in the woven rugs and tapestries, bronze rails with Indian headpieces and huge murals on the lobby walls. The exterior had distinctive art deco details.

In 1941, a second auditorium and screen was added, bringing the total seating to 2,400 and becoming America's first metroplex theater. Two viewings of a film could be shown at the same time. Beginning in 1958, separate features were shown on each screen.

A major renovation in 1961 included a new marquee containing 2,000 fluorescent bulbs.

The Wyandotte Theatre showed its last regular series of films about 1997. It was used for a few live performances after that. There was an effort to convert the building into a performing arts center, but it never happened. The Wyandotte Theater met the wrecking ball in 2007.

In today's era of the multiplex theaters, few of the old Downriver theaters still exist. The photograph collection at the Bacon Memorial District Library in Wyandotte has some great photos of other area theaters, including the Flat Roc, The Allen Park, the Fort Drive-In and the Trenton Theater.



©Wallace Hayden, previously published in the News Herald and in the book "Images and Ancestors"

Elizabeth Denison Forth

By: Tatiana Cosme

Elizabeth Denison Forth was an amazing woman, who has done great things. Her story is quite extraordinary. She started as a slave and then she became a maid, and finally a landowner. Her story, her work ethic, and her determination, are an inspiration to me. This is her story.

Elizabeth Denison Forth was born in 1786. She is also known by the nickname Lisette. She was the daughter of Pete and Hannah Denison, the second child of 6 children. She was born on the William Tucker family farm, located along the Huron River of St. Clair in Macomb. This is where she grew up. Growing up she not only played with her siblings but she played with white and Native American children that also frequented the land. She never learned how to read or write growing up but she was very bright and even learned some native languages. She could catch on to ideas fast, which is amazing for somebody who never learned how to read or write.

The owner of the Denisons was William Tucker and he ended up dying in March 1805. At this time the whole family thought they would get freedom but when Tucker died he specified he wanted Hannah and Pete Denison to be set free after Mrs. Tucker's death and sadly their children would be sent to his brother. Hannah and Pete became free when Mrs. Tucker died in 1806 and then worked for Elijah Brush. Elijah Brush was a good man and he encouraged them to get their children. They would do this by suing for the freedom of their children under the Northwest Ordinance Law which prohibited slavery in the territory. The law was for slaves but it was made for new slaves not already existing slaves like Elisabeth.

Elizabeth and her brother did not get freedom because they were born prior to the Northwest Ordinance effective date. They were denied freedom by the U.S. Supreme Court. All the children in the family beside the youngest would have to keep working as a slave for the rest of their lives. The youngest would go free when he was 25 because he was born after the Northwest Ordinance Law. Shortly after they were denied freedom Judge B. Woodward ruled that Michigan Territory had no obligation to return slaves to slavery if they had been freed by establishing residence in Canada. In 1807 Elizabeth Denison and her family were tired of waiting and serving on other people. She and her family took matters into their own hands and escaped across the Detroit River into Windsor, Canada. Elizabeth and her brother entered Canada with their parents and other siblings. This is when they gained their freedom.

In 1812 Elizabeth went back to Michigan and was employed by prominent families in Detroit. She was close to her employers and they invested in her pay in land. In 1825 she purchased 48.5 acres of land in Pontiac, Michigan. She purchased this land from Stephan Mack an agent of the Pontiac Company. She became the first black person to own property in the United States. Though she never lived on this property she did lease it to her brother Scipio Denison who would get to live on it. On September 25, 1827 she got married to Scipio Forth. Their marriage ended within three years because he ended up dying in 1830 and then she became a widow. She started working full time for John Biddle and his family. She became close to the Biddles and worked with them for 30 years. She kept saving and investing her money in whatever interested her. In 1837 she bought another piece of land, this time in Detroit.

In 1854 Elizabeth was living in her own home when she was contacted by the Biddles. They invited her to go to Paris with them to take care of Mrs. Biddle who was ill. She took the offer and in 1854 she moved to Paris with them. She enjoyed living in Paris and she didn't only have to help Mrs. Biddle but she got to explore the great city. This was an amazing experience for the ex slave and her skill for language became quite useful. She became fluent in French. Even though she loved Paris she moved back to her home in 1854. She lived out the last ten years of her life as a free woman living in her own house in Detroit. She died alone on August 7, 1866 and was buried at Detroit's Elmwood Cemetery.



Before Elizabeth died she donated some of her life savings to build a church where black and white people could worship together. William Biddle, John Biddle, and William's mother also donated some money for the church. The church is St. James Episcopal Church. It is positioned on East River Road facing Canada on Grosse Ile. The chapel was completed in 1868 and in 1959 another building was attached on to the old building.

Elizabeth Denison Forth dreamed beyond the limits society put her under. Society placed her as a single black woman in the early 1800's, but she proved them wrong. She never gave up on her fight for freedom and equality. She is now in the Women's Hall of Fame and we should honor her for her perseverance and determination.

Return Service Requested

Wyandotte Historical Society

Burns Home

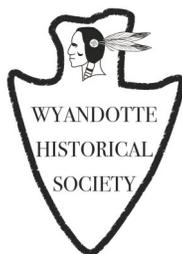
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The 2021 HERITAGE EVENT SERIES

Begins MAY 14, 15 & 16 with the Spring City Wide Garage Sale and continues:

JUNE 27—Pie & Ice Cream Social

AUGUST 28—Wyandotte Stars Annual Home Classic

SEPTEMBER 10, 11 & 12—Fall City Wide Garage Sale

OCTOBER 15 & 16—Historic Cemetery Walk

OCTOBER 22—Halloween Open House

DECEMBER 3, 10 & 17—Festive Fridays

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