

MARCIA MCCRARY

The Michigan Firehouse Museum



The 1898 Ypsilanti Fire House Museum at 110 W. Cross St. Photo by Susan Wineberg

On Sunday, March 16, an intrepid group of some 45 people chose to hear Ms. McCrary speak at the Firehouse Museum in Ypsilanti rather than enjoy the first beautiful spring day after a long, tough winter. The sunshine streaming through the windows and lighting up all those red trucks was a sight to behold!

Marcia was introduced by Program Chair **Ralph Beebe** who noted she is a native of Kalamazoo but has lived in Washtenaw County for many years. She was an elementary school librarian in Ann Arbor for 33 years and retired in 2000. She also taught kindergarten in Milan for two years before coming to Ann Arbor. Marcia has been with the Museum since 1999. She has also served as President of the **Genealogical Society of Washtenaw County** for the past eight years. She is also a Charter Member of the Southeast Michigan Chapter of the **American Truck Historical Society**, serving as Vice-President and Secretary for several years. She is currently the **Curator of the Michigan Antique Fire Equipment Preservation Group** (better known as the Michigan Firehouse Museum) and has written and spoken about trucks and genealogy to a wide

variety of groups.

The **Firehouse Museum** is a unique collection of fire trucks, equipment and artifacts (such as old extinguishers, sirens, nozzles and toys) displayed in a two buildings: an 1898 former fire station connected to a 2002 new building designed as a museum space. The Museum is located at 110 W. Cross St. (near Depot Town) and is open Monday-Friday, 9 AM-noon and Sunday 2-5 PM and also by appointment. Admission is \$3.00 for adults and \$2.00 for students and seniors. Call 734-547-0663 for more information. The Museum also has a fantastic gift shop, selling books, calendars, models, and coloring books—anything about fires and fire fighting—as well as books on the history of Ypsilanti.

"I'm very pleased to be here today. It is interesting how I got here. In fact, I meant to bring with me my thimble which I finally went out and bought after I had decided that I was going to collect thimbles when I went around to tractor shows with my husband, because he restored tractors...I am getting to my point...just work with me!

But before I even bought my first thimble, I wrote an article on how eight of the roads in **Superior Township** got their names. My husband and I had only recently gotten married (it's now 17 years) and we were newlyweds then. We would drive around and he would point out that the Meyers lived here and they are related to so and so, and X lived here and is related to Y. I thought 'I want to play this game too.'

So I picked eight of the roads in Superior Township and I wrote an article about how they got their names. I had no idea what I was getting myself into, when one of the roads that I picked was **Gotfredson Road**. This road runs from Geddes through Salem Township up to North Territorial. However, I could not find a Mr. Gotfredson who had ever lived on that road. I found the **Gotfredson Land Company**, which owned almost an entire section of land and grew crops there and rented out the land. Mary Clark's husband lived on that land. His father was in charge of the Gotfredson Farms. I said to Bob 'all these other roads are named after people, not after

companies.' He said 'I traded Model T Parts (we also have a 1918 Model T) with a guy over there, so let's go and ask him.' I'd been to the Courthouse, I'd been to the library, I'd been to the archives—I thought there had to be an answer as to why they'd name this road after a company. We found out that Mr. Gotfredson never lived here—but then he uttered the fateful words—'you know he made trucks.'

Well, that sort of spiked my interest and I called around and I now know that the typical reaction of even a truck person when you say 'I have a Gotfredson truck' is to say 'what? I wanted to know more about these trucks, so I called Monaghan (Tom) of Domino's Farms who had an antique car museum there at the time, and they didn't know anything. I finally went to the Ypsilanti District Library, where I found Gotfredson Trucks listed in a little book. My husband had also mentioned seeing an advertisement in one of his tractor magazines for Gotfredson Trucks being sold at auction in Dowagiac, Michigan. It was by the auction people from Auburn, Indiana. [At one point I went to the Genealogy Society for help, and you know how that turned out! I'm now President of that group!]



WCHS members enjoy a tour by Marcia McCrary of the Firehouse Museum. Photo: S. Wineberg



A 1917 LaFrance on loan to the Firehouse Museum from Margaret and Fred Brusher. Photo: Susan Wineberg

I called the auction people and got in touch with the person who bought the Gotfredson truck. This is how I contacted Sam Doyle in Oklahoma who told me about someone else who was researching these trucks and getting ready to write about them. We also learned from the tractor people that a Gotfredson truck was for sale at Antique Auto Sales in Monroe. I still remember walking up to this truck, being very calm and cool, seeing if anyone else was interested and immediately bending down to read the serial number. I was worried if a salesman saw me, he'd think 'this lady knows way too much' [and would increase the price]. Well, we didn't buy the truck then, we waited for the price to go up, and bought it three years later, after the man who owned it (who lived in Milan) sold it to the Gibraltar Trade Center, which we bought it from later. It was a 1925 yellow and black Stake Rack Truck, and the first one we bought.

Then we went to a Fire Muster in Ontario, Canada, and we saw a Gotfredson Fire truck there belonging to the Paris Fire Department. We learned that there was a fire truck for sale in Stratford. In June of 1992, we bought this fire truck and had it shipped home. My husband and I were square dancers for many years and I was talking about my fire truck at a square dance, and a lady said 'I would be so upset if my husband dragged home a fire truck.' And I had to reply, 'you don't understand at all—I'm the one dragging home the fire truck for him to restore!'

After buying the truck we joined the SPAMFA Organization to find out about

how to find parts. We also learned more about Gotfredson Trucks. They were built in Detroit and in Windsor (Ontario), Canada, from roughly 1920-1948. **Ben Gotfredson** moved to Detroit around 1906. He married a woman named Mary Kolb whose father sold horses in Detroit and Windsor. About 1913, they formed the American Auto Trimming Company in Detroit and Windsor. When they decided they needed a truck, they built the truck both in Detroit and Windsor. So, it's been a joint, hands-across-the border thing for a long time. Of the 15 known fire trucks that are Gotfredsons, are all Canadian. There are 59 total trucks, worldwide, as we know of a truck in New Zealand, which was in Australia to begin with. There were truck branches in Cleveland, Ohio; Sidney, Australia; Toronto, some in California (Los Angeles), Detroit etc.

I gave up a day researching Gotfredson trucks back in 1992 because a man at my church, St. Luke's Episcopal, had passed away. He had been on the International Olympic Committee and lived near us. After the ceremony I was talking to his grandson who lives on Superior Road, next to our property on Leforge Road, and somehow mentioned Gotfredson trucks, and he mentioned his cousin Patsy Robey who is married to Ed Gotfredson. So, it was clear that that was the place I needed to be that day, not in Lansing looking at the financial records of this company. As a result, we have met

members of the Gotfredson family, many of whom are in the Los Angeles area.

Bob Gotfredson has been to our house and seen our Gotfredson trucks. When my husband told him how he took the engine out of our fire truck, he said 'you can't take the engines out of those trucks. We (my father and my uncles) put the engines in first and built the frame around them.' My husband replied that he and a friend used a tractor to get the truck at just the right angle, then tipped the truck, and explained how they were able to remove the engine (which took five hours!) As you can see, we've had a lot of fun making all kinds of connections through collecting Gotfredson trucks.

We now own, besides the stake rack truck and the fire truck, a wrecker [my husband dreamt a number of a fire truck—60-055—and we went to a show and found a wrecker with that number, so we had to buy it]. We took it to the first orphan car show, and after being out in the rain all day, having my pocket stuffed with junk, I turned into our driveway, hit a tree and broke my hip! After a few weeks in the hospital, I started laughing and thought 'when do you suppose the last Gotfredson truck accident was in Washtenaw County?' and I suspect it had probably been 50 years before that. Now I just sit in the wrecker but I'm not allowed to drive it. The Fire Museum started in the old Fire Station next door that was built in 1898. There were actually two fire stations in Ypsilanti before that. One was on South Huron near City Hall and was built in 1873



Overview of the Firehouse Museum and its collection of fire trucks. Photo: Susan Wineberg



The Firehouse Museum also displays artifacts such as old extinguishers. Photo: S. Wineberg

with money from the Cornwell Company to help with all the fires at their paper mill. The other was in Depot Town in the Thompson Building on River Street and was called the East Side Hose Company #2. If you look carefully, you can see the sign on the doors there. The building there is now being cleaned out and we are looking for the original signs. From 1898-1915, horses were used at the fire station next door. After 1916, all trucks were motorized. We were told that horses were buried here on this site, and when we dug the foundation for this new building we found a horse bone, which is now on display in one of our cases.

In 1916 we bought two Seagrave Fire Trucks. In 1924 we bought another Seagrave and in 1939 we bought 2 new Seagraves. We have a snippet on video tape, that Herb Miller (Alonzo Miller's grandson) loaned to us, of the arrival of one of these 1939 vehicles at the train depot in Depot Town and all the trouble they had getting it off the flatbed car that it was on, and then driving it down the street. The City of Ypsilanti has been very generous with sharing information with us. In 1969 I found a listing of the equipment at the time: 2-1000 gal. pumpers, an 85 foot aerial ladder truck, a 750 gal. pumper, a station wagon and a pick-up truck. If any of you have questions about that era, we have a real-live Ypsilanti firefighter here today who can help you! **Paul Woodside** is here today. He worked from 1955-1985. He is assisted by **Ernie Griffin**, bottle collector, Ypsilanti historian and co-curator of the Museum. In addition to the 'live' ones here today, I've constructed an index of all the firefighters who served Ypsilanti

and they are organized by name, with years served, indexed with photographs, and newspaper articles. These are all cross-indexed as well, so you can search by picture number and newspaper article number. We've got lots and lots of information and many wonderful historical photographs of firefighting in Ypsilanti. We have

45 firefighters buried at Highland Cemetery (she brought pictures of their tombstones, organized, of course, in a notebook) and eight buried at St. John's Cemetery.

In response to my church's request to do a Lenten Program, I did a presentation about the 17 firefighters who were Episcopalians (of the total of 104 on my list). A group of these firefighters went on to become Mayors of Ypsilanti. In the late 1800s, it was high status to be a firefighter, a Mason and an Episcopalian. Eight of these 17 firefighters went on to become mayors—**Chauncey Joslin, Benjamin Follett, Francis Pembroke Bogardus, Henry R. Scovill, Thomas Ninde, Clark Cornwell, Yost and O. B. Thompson**. This presentation was later published as part of the *Family History Capers* of the Genealogical Society.

A reporter asked me if I had sketches for each firefighter.

I don't but I thought it was a good idea! This is now one of the things I'm working on, which of course appeals to me as a genealogist as well. But it is also nice to have it for the City of Ypsilanti. I do have a list of the Fire Chiefs and pictures of their tombstones as well. They begin with that of **Wallace W. Worden** from 1895

and extends to **Fred Babcock** (1906), **Alonzo Miller** (1922), **James Dignan** (1941), **Gerald Kelly** (1951), **Russell Forsyth** (1965), **Ralph Crawford** (1966), **John C. Coleman** (1983), and **James Roberts** (1987-present). Roberts is the only firefighter serving today who worked in the old fire station before it became the museum.

The Fire Department Building was built in 1898. In 1975 they had a truck that was too large, so they decided to build a new building on Michigan Avenue. At that point **Tom Conway** purchased the old Fire Station and ran his plumbing business out of there for 24 years. He also had nine (9) vehicles and 48 gas pumps in there as well! It was a wonderful display of his collections. They ran their business from the second floor and they were running up and down the stairs all day long. They were young then and worked hard!

In March of 1999, **Howard** and **Norma Weaver** bought the fire station next door from Tom Conway's family after he had a stroke. Their dream was to have a fire station museum especially since Norma's father was **Fred Schmid**, a firefighter and former Fire Chief in Ann Arbor. If it hadn't been for Norma and Howard's interest in fire trucks, and giving back to the community, we would not be sitting in this wonderful new addition. Howard and Norma tried several jobs before they came up with the idea of providing people with dog food at any time of the day or night. They began their business on Cornell Road and last year they bought Pet Supply Plus. Now they service 32 states. The fire station actually belongs to Howard and Norma and they lease it to us for \$1.00/year. They funded the entire cost of the



Fire truck on display in the 1898 section of the museum. Photo: S. Wineberg



Marcia McCrary tells us about the museum and her passion for collecting trucks! Photo: Susan Wineberg.

addition. We are struggling now to get the museum on a self-sustaining basis. We have a director of development and we are actively seeking grants. We also have four apartments in the back and the income from these apartments helps fund the ongoing work of the museum. We hopeful that we're going to be around for a long, long time! The Weavers also run *Yesterday's Collection, Inc.* at 5899 Jackson Rd., which is a store selling tin signs, automotive art, neon clocks, jukeboxes, gas pumps and Franklin Mint models. They even have an ice cream shop there as well!

The vehicles in the museum include **Hand Pumps: 1886 Gleason and Bailey** from Arlington, OH and **1900 Rumsey** from Otter Lake (Lapeer County). These are the two oldest things we have. We also have a **1908 Ahrens Steamer** on loan from the Detroit Historical Museum and four **American LaFrance** vehicles—a **1916** from Battle Creek [this one is unrestored and doesn't look red—but it is! We always like to show this one to the young schoolchildren to illustrate how dirt changes a color]; a **1917** from Pennsylvania; a **1923** from Fredonia [NY—which says Ann Arbor—it was purchased by the Weavers and is the only truck that actually belongs to the museum—it is now a parade vehicle]; and a **1925** from Grand Rapids. We have a **1927 Model T Ford** (This summer is the 100th anniversary of the Model T and we're going to have special events here); a **1927 Graham Brothers** from Rochester (Michigan); a **1928 Gotfredson-Bickle** from Guelph; a **1928 Seagrave** from Mohawk, NY; a **1938 Seagrave** from Detroit; a **1947 Dodge** from Dexter; a **1952**

Seagrave from Ypsilanti; a **1965 Seagrave** from Kalamazoo and a **1968 Mack** from Pennsylvania. Many of them are on loan to us from various individuals and they all run pretty well.

We have collections of many other items in the display cases on both floors. Look for old toys, extinguishers, patches, emblems, breathing

apparatus, bells and clothing. Some of the old extinguishers are glass balls called grenades. Some were filled with a saline solution and others with carbon tetrachloride. The latter are quite dangerous as they release phosgene gas when thrown into a fire. Obviously they are no longer used! Upstairs Howard has toys in the display cases and another volunteer, **Bill Erickson** has brought in a small sample of his Ahrens toys—to match the trucks. We don't have a lot of information on these items yet but we are working on that."

Marcia ended by showing a picture of a mis-painted STOP sign spelled SOPT



Old fire equipment on display in Ypsilanti Firehouse Museum. Photo: S. Wineberg

and urged us all the come again. The Museum is located at 110 W. Cross St. Ypsilanti. They are open every Sunday from 2-5 PM and M-F 9-noon and by appointment. Their phone number is 734-547-0663. You can email them at firemuseum2@msn.com or visit their website at <http://communities.msn.com/YpsilantiFireMuseum>.

New Gardeners In The Garden

We are sad to report that our intrepid gardener, **Pat Thompson**, had to resign from the Board to take care of her parents in Stony Brook, New York. **Sue Kosky** is stepping in to help coordinate a new team (**Patty Creal, Ann DeFreytas** and **Judy Chrisman**) that will be attempting to fill Pat's very large shoes. They will be setting up a schedule for watering, weeding and planting. Right now they would like some **Annuals for the garden**, which is interpreted in the 1880-1900 time period. Any flower that was available before 1900 would be appropriate. Some examples would include *spider flower (cleome), coleus, cosmos, sweet william, foxglove, globe amaranth, heliotrope, balsam, sweet pea, petunia, drummond phlox, clarkia, ageratum, sweet alyssum, pansies, French marigolds, stock, four o'clocks, poppies, geraniums, salvia, dusty miller, nasturtium, verbena and zinnia*. We will start planting in mid-May so anyone who would like to **donate flowers (or money for the garden)** please let us know. Call 734-662-9092. If you have questions you can call Sue at 517-423-5058. A volunteer group will be at the museum on **Saturday, May 31** (weather permitting) to help with the planting.

Sue has also undertaken a very interesting project. Since **Monticello** (Thomas Jefferson's home/museum in Virginia) is commemorating the **Bicentennial of the Lewis and Clark Expedition** by offering seeds of many plants discovered during the journey [osage orange was a major discovery as was clarkia, prairie flax, and others], Sue is starting her own Lewis and Clark Garden! Some of the seeds have actually germinated so we are keeping our fingers crossed. To learn more about the Thomas Jefferson Center for Historic Plants, visit their website at www.twinkleleaf.org.