



Elgin History Museum News January 2022

Society Organizer Mike Alft Becomes History

Elizabeth Marston and David Siegenthaler



E. C. "Mike" Alft passed away on November 22, 2021 at the age of 96. Mike always said Elgin was his hometown. In his years of community service to Elgin, Mike shaped the town we know today. He taught economics to generations of Elgin High School students, served on the Elgin City Council, and was mayor during the turbulent late 1960s. He wrote the histories of different cultures and institu-

tions in Elgin, as well as the most comprehensive overall Elgin history in the last 100 years, *Elgin: An American History*. Mike worked for social justice and Elgin improvement, including low income housing, urban renewal and historic preservation. He spearheaded the effort to make Vientiane in Laos a sister city to Elgin. The Gail Borden Public Library was a second home for Mike, and he served on the Library Board and the Library Foundation over many years. He was a charter member of the Sports Hall of Fame in 1980. Mike was honored with the Elgin Image Awards Lifetime Achievement and the City of Elgin named a street after Mike, Alft Lane.

E. C. "Mike" Alft was only 36 years old when he joined a local group to re-start the Elgin Historical Society in 1961. There had been a historical society in Elgin since the 1870s, an outgrowth of the Old Settlers Association, but both groups folded during the Depression in the 1930s. Madeline Waggoner was the first president of the Elgin Area Historical Society and Mike Alft was Secretary. Other significant organizers included LaRoy

Morning, Karl Lehr and Hazel Belle Perry. Mike was president of the Society in 1962 and went on and off the Society board over the years as he had time and was needed. Mike's wife, Fran, volunteered at the Museum for over 20 years, cataloging the collection and performing the duties of Registrar.

Mike promoted Elgin history through the publication of 17 local history books in addition to an autobiography "*A Reader and His Favorite Book*," over 1,200 newspaper articles and hundreds of presentations to various community groups. He also participated in numerous Elgin house walk tours, presented an Elgin character in 15 cemetery walks, conducted bus tours, and spoke on radio programs. Mike supported the effort to save the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House and was eager to receive reports on the project even after he moved to Pennsylvania in 2016.

Mike lived to be part of the Elgin Area Historical Society for over 50 years! He left an impressive legacy of historical research that will continue to be the basis for most of the Museum's exhibits and publications. Hardly a day goes by here at the Museum that we do not refer to his publications or think about Mike and Fran. Their work is all around us. We are extremely fortunate and grateful that Mike chose Elgin as his hometown!



Mike and Fran Alft

The Crackerbarrel

Published bimonthly by the Elgin Area Historical Society
360 Park Street, Elgin, IL 60120
Phone 847-742-4248
e-mail: museum@elginhistory.org




President: Al Walters
Vice President: Tricia Grosser
Secretary: Christen Sundquist
Corr. Secretary: Ricky Harris
Treasurer: William Briska



Editor: Rebecca Marco

The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.
Next deadline February 20, 2022

 Visit our website Elginhistory.org

Opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Society's Board of Directors.
©2022 Elgin Area Historical Society. All rights reserved.

Opens Saturday, February 5, 2022

The Settlement Exhibit at Gail Borden Public Library

The Elgin History Museum and the Library partnered to create an exhibit featuring life on Fremont, Hickory and Ann Streets, based on the Project 2-3-1 documentary.



Elgin History Museum

Friday, February 18, 2022, 7 p.m.

Hemmens Auditorium

Making Space: The Documentary Premiere

Based on the 2020 Elgin protests, the documentary explores racial justice in Elgin.



Ernie Broadnax in front of the new mural in downtown Elgin

Sunday, February 20, 2 p.m.

at Elgin History Museum

Significant Black Women of the Reconstruction Era and Beyond

Dr. Felicia La Boy, pastor at the First United Methodist Church in Elgin, will feature amazing, but maybe unknown, women and their accomplishments.



2022 Program Schedule

Betsy Armistead, Program Chair

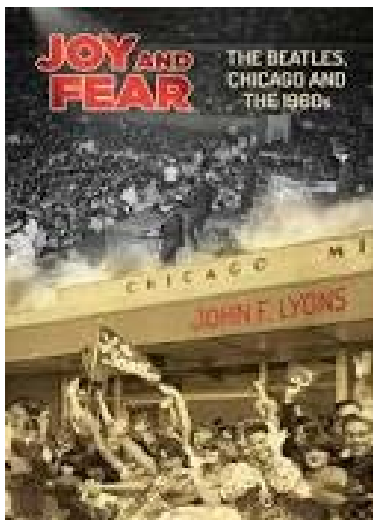
Check the website for current information. elginhistory.org/events

Sunday, January 9, 2022, 2 p.m.

at Elgin History Museum

The Beatles, Chicago and the 1960s

John F. Lyons examines the impact of the Beatles on the Chicago metropolitan area and discusses his book on the subject.



The Joseph Hecker Family of Elgin

by David Siegenthaler

The 1880s were boom years for the Elgin National Watch Co. (ENWC). From the beginning to the end of that decade, the factory's employment more than doubled, its output of watches more than tripled, and it surpassed Waltham as the nation's leading watch manufacturer. In 1886, the ENWC came up with a new approach to advertising. Seeking to capitalize on the popularity of military band music at the time, the ENWC hired Professor Joseph Hecker (1845-1917), an internationally-known bandmaster and composer, to build up an existing military band to give promotional concerts around the country.

The existing Elgin Military Band was composed of amateurs who were mostly watch factory employees. Without a professional director or professional musicians, it lacked the proficiency to give promotional concerts. Professor Hecker stipulated that he would have the authority to choose his musicians from all over the country. They would be paid daily wages when on tour and offered watch factory jobs when not on tour.

By 1887, the Elgin National Watch Factory Military Band, consisting of 60 or more members, was transformed by Professor Hecker into a professional-quality concert band. They toured throughout the Midwest and South, performing before large crowds at conventions, expositions and other engagements, always garnering much applause and great reviews. Though it also provided the music for the First Regiment, Illinois National Guard in Chicago, the band was designed primarily for concerts rather than marching; reeds and strings outnumbered the brass instruments.

In May 1890, soon after their concert at the Spring Palace in Fort Worth, Texas, a fire broke out. Most of their instruments, uniforms, baggage and manuscript music, including all of Professor Hecker's recent compositions, were destroyed. One instrument salvaged was a large drum, which has been restored and is in our Museum archives.

When Professor Hecker resigned as director in September 1892, the ENWC withdrew its support, and most of the professional musicians left the city. Although Professor Hecker assembled a band to play at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893 and was associated with other local military bands later, the glory days had passed. Never again would he tour the country to national acclaim.



The restored drum

Professor Hecker continued to live in Elgin after the band broke up in 1892. He turned his focus to promoting and teaching music locally and organized the Elgin Philharmonic Society and the Elgin College of Music. His four children, Stella, Berta, Carl and Cecile, all were musical child prodigies on the piano or violin, and frequently performed publicly.

Joseph Hecker was born August 22, 1845, at Nassau, Germany. He began the study of music at the age of five, began arranging music at eight, played first violin in a symphony orchestra at ten and was directing that orchestra at age fifteen. He continued in this position for five years, when he was also a cathedral organist.

At the age of 20 he went to England, settled in London, and became bandmaster of the 82nd Regiment, a favorite of the Prince of Wales. He was the first director to use string basses in a military band, and to have arranged symphonies for band performance. While in England, Joseph married Jane Astin (1852-1911), a talented vocalist, in 1876. The couple soon emigrated to Canada, where Joseph became an orchestra conductor and choir director in Winnipeg and Montreal. All four of their children were born in Canada.

In 1886, Joseph was recruited by the ENWC to build a professional promotional military band, and in 1887 emigrated to the United States. At the same time that he directed the Elgin National Watch Factory Military Band, he also directed Chicago's First Regiment National Guard marching band. He and his family initially lived in Chicago until he developed a bad case of bronchitis, at which time his doctor advised him to move away from the smoke and fumes of Chicago. The family moved to Elgin about 1888 and by about 1891 had bought the home at 537 E. Chicago St., which remained in the Hecker family until 1921.



Hecker Home, 537 E. Chicago Street



Jane Astin Hecker

Following the breakup of the Elgin National Watch Factory Military Band in 1892, Joseph opened the Elgin College of Music, where he taught every branch of vocal and instrumental music. He organized and directed several amateur bands, which included many of his former musicians from the glory days. In the late 1890s he gave weekly concerts in Lords Park, which drew huge crowds. He was choir director of the First Congregational Church and, later, the First Baptist

Church. He helped organize the Slayton Ladies' Orchestra and the Elgin Boys' Band, which became the Elgin High School Band.

Each family member was an outstanding musician. "We did everything together," daughter Berta later recalled. "As children we never were forced to practice our music or to perform. But our happiest hours were spent playing together." All four children played the violin and Stella and Berta played the piano as well.

Stella Muriel Hecker (1879-1962) received a degree from London's Royal Academy of Music in 1913. A well-known concert pianist, she became head of music at Wheaton College and also choir director at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Elgin. The world-renowned Polish concert pianist I.J. Paderewski pronounced Stella to be a brilliant piano virtuoso when she was only 16 years old. Stella never married and is buried in Bluff City Cemetery.

Berta Josephine Hecker Browning (1880-1977) was a professional pianist and cellist. She was also a composer and gave many recitals and concerts throughout the United States and England. In 1922 she married Howard Browning and they are buried in Bluff City Cemetery. Berta was gifted with a memory that allowed her to play a composition after hearing it played only once, though she had never seen the music. An official proclamation set aside July 23, 1969, as "Berta Hecker Browning Day" in Elgin. That evening, well over 1,500 residents turned out at the Wing Park Band Shell to honor Berta, then 88 years old. At that age, though she had sight in only one eye, she continued to practice on the piano at least two hours a day.



Berta Hecker Browning

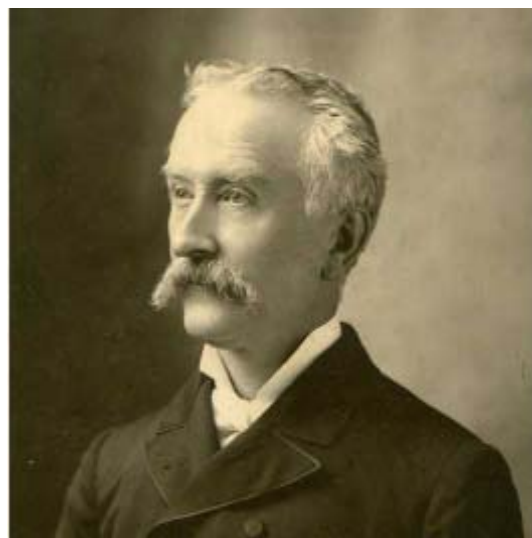


The Hecker Family, left to right: Joseph, Cecile, Stella, Berta, Carl, and Jane

Carl Bertram Hecker (1883-1961) gained international fame as conductor of the Chicago Concert Ensemble. He was also concert master of the Chicago Grand Opera Co. and once held a similar position with the American Opera Co. After performing at the Chicago World's Fair in 1934, he retired from the grueling concert life. Carl fell in love with a Geneva, Illinois, girl and settled there to pursue his interest as an architect. Interestingly, no one in Geneva, other than his wife Clara, ever learned of his previous life as a musician, as his anonymity was part of his ideals. Carl had been married previously, in 1910, and divorced. He is buried in Batavia.

Cecile Hecker (Sister Mary Magdalen) (1884-1978) went to Europe to study art in 1911. She joined the Order of St. Anne at an early age. Cecile established a school for girls in New Zealand and later became supervisor of the Episcopal Girls School in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin. Cecile never married and is buried in Lincoln, Massachusetts.

Jane, Joseph's wife, died at age 59 of breast cancer on November 14, 1911. Joseph died of colon cancer at age 70 on February 1, 1917. They are buried in Bluff City Cemetery. Joseph was a member of the Mystic Shrine, the highest order of Masons. Joseph's motto, which was framed and hung in his studio, read "Music washes away from the soul the dust of everyday life."



Joseph Hecker

Acknowledgments: Mike Alft's books and newspaper articles; obituaries and other newspaper articles; Hazel Belle Perry's "Old Elgin Tales" columns; "Elgin Time: A History of the Elgin National Watch Company, 1864 to 1968" (by E.C. Alft & William H. Briska, 2020); Elgin city directories; federal censuses; Ancestry.com; Findagrave.com; City of Elgin death records; etc.

A Picture's Worth a Thousand...Clues?

Rebecca Miller, Museum Educator and David Siegenthaler

Photos we take today are digitally stamped with the date. What a time saver! An important piece of information is saved for the ages. This wasn't always the case, of course. But an eagle-eyed fan of history can still look for clues in an old photo and figure out when the image was captured.

Below is a photo of Chicago Street, looking east. The bridge is about a half block behind the photographer, John Manley Adams. Notice the wooden sidewalks and unpaved street. Elgin's first sidewalks were rough wooden planks; they were replaced with concrete beginning in 1881 but the process was slow. In 1900 Chicago Street was paved with bricks and the city began asphalt street paving in 1903, starting with Grove Avenue. Because the sidewalk shown here is wooden and the street is unpaved, we can narrow down the date of this photo to sometime before 1900.

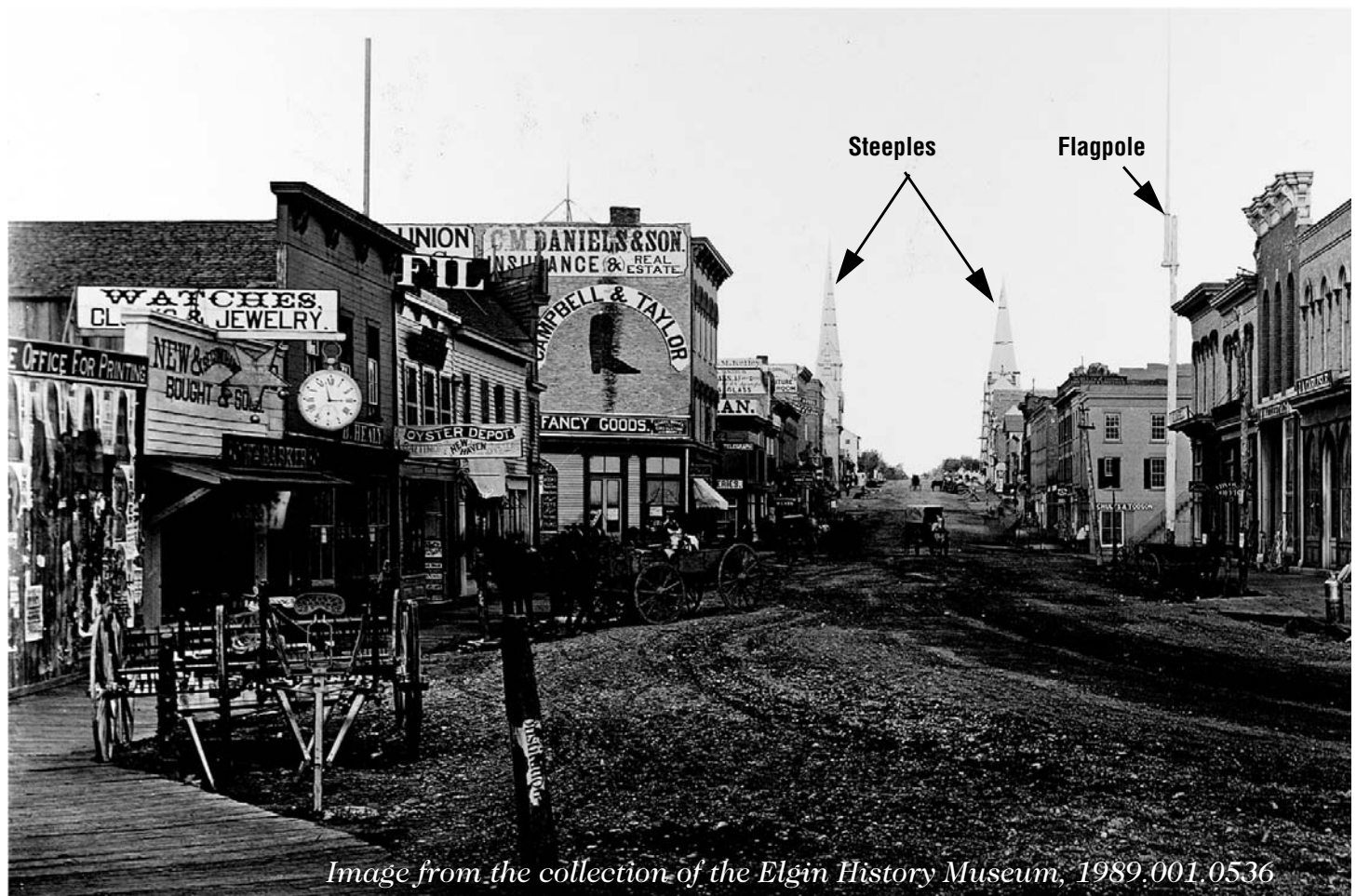
A good student of history can go further. Notice the light-colored flagpole on the right side of the photo, just past the open-topped farm wagon. It rises above all

the nearby rooftops and was known as the "Liberty Pole." While an electric arc light tower was installed in Fountain Square in 1883, we know this is a flagpole because the electric arc light tower was distinctly shaped with lattice work that would be visible from this view. The Fountain Square electric arc light tower was installed in the same spot as this flagpole. With this information we know that the photo was taken prior to 1883 when the flagpole was replaced with the arc light tower.

We could stop here and say this photo was taken prior to 1883, but there are more clues on the horizon. Notice the two church steeples on either side of Chicago Street, far in the distance. The church on the left, 270 E. Chicago Street, was a Baptist Church built in 1870, and it still stands today, though it lost its steeple in the 1920 tornado. This tells us the photo was taken after 1870, giving us a date range of 1870-1883.

We are not done yet! The biggest clue is the church steeple on the other side of the street. These two churches were not directly across the street from each other; the picture's perspective just forms this illusion. The church steeple on the right was a couple of blocks closer to the photographer and was located at 225-229 E. Chicago Street.

The church on the right is under construction; scaffolding can be seen beside the steeple. This church, the First Presbyterian Church, was built beginning in 1871



and was completed by July 1872. Only five months after its completion, the church caught fire and burned down on December 5, 1872. Having spent a great deal of their funds on the original church, the congregation could only afford to build a smaller church around the corner on the adjoining lot at 10 Villa Court. The rebuilt First Presbyterian Church was completed in 1873, without a grand steeple. The 1873 church is still evident today: 10 Villa Court now houses Elgin's Knights of Columbus Council Hall.

These clues tell us with certainty that the photo was taken between construction of the church in July 1872 and the fire that destroyed it on December 5, 1872.



Image from the collection of the Elgin History Museum, 2011.000.0010

This photo shows the National Street bridge, looking east. It is marked "Noon hour lunch break at (the Elgin National) watch factory." The first clue for dating this photo is seen in the distance across the bridge. Two electric streetcars are shown midway up National Street. Electric street car service began in 1890. With this info we can say the photo was taken after 1890. Elgin would see its first locally owned automobile in 1902. Within 10 years cars were a common sight and fewer horse drawn buggies were seen on our streets. But, certainly, the change did not happen overnight.

Our next clue is seen on the far right of the photo; it is the Elgin National Watch Company's clock tower. This clock tower was replaced in 1904, allowing us to date this photo to 1890-1904.

Our final clue is the bridge itself. The National Street bridge, originally built in 1870, was an iron latticework structure with criss-crossing support beams across the top above the roadway. That bridge was replaced in 1902 with the bridge seen here, an open-topped structure that did not require that form of reinforcement. Thus we have narrowed the date of this photo to 1902-1904.

Posters of this and other images are sold in the Museum Store for \$5. Imagine the fun you could have walking your friends through these clues!

Thank You Giving Tuesday Donors!

These are the people who donated on Giving Tuesday 2021. Thank you all!

Alters, Shawn	Knight, Linda
Anderson, Brian	Koss, Eileen
Armistead, Betsy	LaFleur, Trish
Barnhart, Jerri and Ken	Larson, Paul R.
Barry, Christopher and Jan	Laura Stroud
Barton, Valerie	Lee, Maureen and Tom
Bero Smith, Julia	Lytle, Miriam
Brevik, Marianne	Marco, Rebecca
Briska, Luann	Marston, Emma
Briska, William	Marston, Jane
Brown, Frederick and Virginia	Marston, John and Elizabeth
Calhamer, Tish	Marston, William
Cramton, Susan	Martin, Dorothy
Cullnan, Daniell	Martinez, Rosamaria
Danielson, Barry and Andrea	McAvoy, Katherine
Daubert, Dave and Marlene	McClendon, Julia
De La O, Sarah	McClure, Sandra and Dennis
Devine, John and Ana	Meyer, Jeanne
Dorgan, David	Miller, Rebecca
Dyer, Maurice	Mullin, Tricia
Fry, Mark	Murphy, Krisilee
Fukala, Jennifer	Navin, Mary
Gabel, Terry and Sue	Nawara, Beth and David
Brigham	
Galfi, Rudolph and Lillian	Gregory, Mary and Martin
Golden, Patricia	O'Connor, Linda
Grittani, Thomas	Peters, Amber
Grosser, Courtney	Preradovic, Glenna and Mark
Grosser, Kimberly	Ramirez, Erin
Grosser, Maureen	Rauschenberger, Steve
Grosser, Patricia	Rosenberg, Teresa
Harkin, Dorothy	Rothaug, Harry
Harris, Ricky	Roxworthy, Dennis
Hauser, John	Rush, Carrie
Hecht, Carol	Schroeder, Robert and Judith
Hoffman, Marsha	Shull, David
Hoke, Gigi	Sorton, Judy and Alex
Hokenson, Thomas	Stern, Allison
Hoppe, Roberta	Stern, Ashley
Hyser, Susan	Stern, Margaret
Jernberg, Steve	Sundquist, Christen
Jocius, Patricia	Swan, Valerie
Kars, Marjo	Turner, James
Keleher, Amy	Turnquist, Jerry
Kelly, Deborah	Viglucchi, Tina
Kemph, Carolyn	Zickus, Matt
Kerr, Susan	

ELGIN HISTORY MUSEUM
360 PARK STREET
ELGIN, IL 60120



Welcome New Members

Ethan Auburn
Grant Born
Beth Nelson

Melissa Routzahn
Amy Wisinski and Robb Walker
Pamela Zoller

Collections Corner: ELGIN Watch Advertising

Beth Nawara, Curator of Collections

John and Elaine Beecken recently donated this 1950s advertising display to the Museum's permanent collection. It has a light bulb at the top. The slanted gold colored metal pieces held the watches. The poodle sits on a board that could tilt to make the dog look like it was moving. The Elgin National Watch Company sent displays such as this to jewelry stores that carried Elgin watches to enhance display of the products.



Photo by Ira Marcus