

The Crackerbarrel



Elgin History Museum News September 2022

President's Report

Alan Walters, President



Partnerships Make a Difference

At the Elgin History Museum our strongest relationship is the bond we have forged with volunteers and members. Every step forward the Museum's board and staff takes is dependent on the resources, talents and support of the many dedicated Museum friends.

Successful organizations are always looking outside their own ecosystems to create temporary and permanent partnerships that enhance each other's missions. The Museum is fortunate that a mid-sized city such as Elgin offers so many partnership opportunities.

The most obvious connection is with the City of Elgin. They are the Museum's landlord at Old Main and they cheerfully and lovingly help us care for this historic landmark. Neither the City nor the Museum could have saved the historic Nancy Kimball Cobblestone on their own. Working together we have a community success story to tell....and another really cool renovated building! September is Cemetery Walk month. Without the City's backing and the support of the Bluff City Cemetery staff led by Rick Ellis, the Museum couldn't bring you the 35th annual edition of this signature event.

Libraries and museums are natural partners. The Elgin Historical Society and Gail Borden Public Library regularly support one another with programs, ideas, marketing and artifacts.

Who else is a Museum partner? The Explore Elgin Tourism Bureau: they work hard to bring visitors to Elgin. The Museum works hard to be a quality attraction worth a visit.

Just recently, a Museum Crawl evening was co-hosted with the Elgin Public Museum, Elgin Fire Barn #5 and the U-46 Observatory. A chance to visit four museums in one evening....that's partnering!

Have you been to the Farm Zoo at Lords Park lately? Did you notice it is now named Tefft's Farm and contains a sign board telling visitors about Dr. Tefft's important contributions to early Elgin? This re-branding was made possible by a partnership with the Friends of Lords Park Zoo.

A new exhibit is now open on the second floor of the History Museum. *Elgin's Fox River: An Environmental History* examines the effects the Fox has had on Elgin, as well as the effects Elgin has had on the river. It is a tale of need, convenience, disregard, harm and redemption. The Museum couldn't completely tell the story ourselves so we partnered with the Friends of the Fox River and Elgin Public Museum.

Partnerships are so important to us that our Board includes members of other organizations. Currently we have board members with ties to the City of Elgin, Gail Borden Library, Explore Elgin, U-46, Friends of the Lords Park Zoo, local churches, businesses and non-profits.

Come to the Museum soon and enjoy a program and the new exhibit.

Welcome New Members

- Merle Childs
- Meredith Strohm Gunter
- Betty Harwood
- Angel Jacoby
- Jan Jamiolkowski
- John Keehan
- Rabbi Margaret Frisch Klein
- Derrick Oregon
- Jeff Pharis
- Carol Rauschenberger
- Elda Sirridge

35th Annual Cemetery Walk Sept. 24 & 25

This year's Walk will again have timed entry tickets that must be purchased in advance. There will be two tours on Saturday and two on Sunday. Visit brownbag-tickets.com to buy tickets, which are \$15.00 each.

This year's featured Elginites are:

Featured Character: Charlene "Barney" Barnett



Charlene Barnett, an Elgin native and graduate of Elgin High School, played in the All American Girls Baseball League. She entered the league in 1947 playing for development teams, finishing off her third and fourth seasons playing second base for the Rockford Peaches. Her outstanding athletic ability helped the Peaches win the championship in 1950.

Mark Wentworth Dunham

Mark Dunham, importer and owner of Percheron horses, had a breeder's instinct. Living at Oaklawn Farm in Wayne IL, he was the first farmer that found a work horse that could manage the new farm equipment known as the Mechanical Reaper. Mark was influenced by the 'can do' entrepreneurial spirit of the age. His accomplishments earned the gratitude and admiration of many farmers and friends.

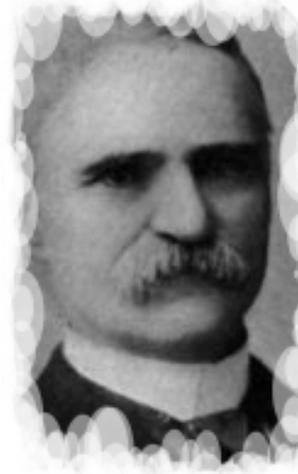


Louis Carl Freeman

Louis Carl Freeman was a 45 year veteran of the Elgin Police Dept. He worked the night shift until 1898, when he was promoted to sergeant and eventually became acting marshal. He was also responsible for re-designing the officers' uniforms in 1902 to include each officer's rank and years of service. He served the City of Elgin longer than anyone at that time.

The Kerber Brothers

The Kerber Brothers opened a retail meat market in downtown Elgin in 1882. A slaughterhouse and ice house expanded the business along the bank of the Fox River just south of Elgin in 1890. The Kerber Packing Company became one of the largest independent meat processing firms in the Midwest and remained in the Kerber family until 1950.



Adam H. Lowrie

Born in Scotland, he came to Elgin in 1882. Prominent in business and church activities, Mr. Lowrie was a staunch supporter of everything that was good for Elgin. He was a successful newspaper man who bought and consolidated the Elgin Daily and the Weekly Advocate into the The Daily News. He was honored by the Board of Education in 1913 when Oak St. school was re-named the Adam H. Lowrie school.

Dr. Ora L. Pelton

Dr. Pelton devoted his life to medicine. He opened the Pelton Clinic in Elgin in 1917 and along with two other doctors provided care for many patients in the Fox Valley area. He also belonged to the American, Illinois and Kane County Medical Societies. Dr. Pelton traveled the world studying the latest developments in medicine.



Dr. Clara Todson

Clara Todson came to Elgin at an early age. A graduate of Elgin High School, she continued her studies at the College of Osteopathic Medicine in Chicago. After graduating with high honors she opened her own practice in the Spurling Building. She became involved with the suffrage movement, forming the Civic Equality League addressing issues concerning women. They toured Illinois to gain support for their cause, helping ratify the 19th amendment to the Constitution.



Thank You Donors

- Norman Alabaugh in honor of Bill Briska
- Dennis and Laurie Roxworthy and the Chicagoland Thunderbirds Car Club for the Classic Car Show
- Rich Renner, Jerry Turnquist and Linda Rock for Speaker's Bureau honorarium donations.

2022 Board Fundraiser Donors

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	Walsh, Larry

Arthur Leath and His Furniture Company

David Siegenthaler

Arthur Leath (1877-1927) came to Elgin in 1902 with only \$12.50 in his pocket and no high school education. 25 years later he died a millionaire, the head of a chain of 32 retail furniture stores in the upper Midwest. His success was due to his exceptional skills as a craftsman, businessman and salesman, combined with vision, persistence and the courage to change and adapt. Attorney Arthur Paulson, his longtime friend and business associate, said in his eulogy that Arthur “was an executive of rare powers. His judgment of men was unequalled Quiet, unassuming, unselfish and with a sincere interest in his associates, he possessed the faculty of arousing action and enthusiasm on their part.”

After Arthur died in 1927, the Leath Co. was reorganized. Headquarters were moved to Rockford, then Chicago and finally to Atlanta. Furniture and mattress manufacturing ended in Elgin about 1931, during the Great Depression. The Leath retail store, however, remained in Elgin for 97 years, finally closing in 2000 at 164-66 E. Chicago St., the building it occupied since 1940. Though the main offices were no longer in Elgin, two Elgin men became presidents of the entire Leath furniture chain: Gordon C. Adams in 1970, and Robert C. Feuerhaken in 1978. The number of Leath stores peaked at about 42 in the mid-1990s and quickly declined after that, the final stores closing in 2007.



Leath store on Chicago Street, circa 1985

In June 1903, at the northwest corner of National St. and S. Grove Ave., across from the watch factory, Arthur Leath opened a one-room upholstery repair shop. With no money to advertise, he solicited business door-to-door. His first associate was Carl Rauschenberger, who, 30 years later, would start his own

furniture business. Arthur and Carl found an effective and cost-free way to advertise. They would carry furniture up and down National St. when watch factory workers were pouring out of the big factory at noon and closing time.

Growing rapidly, Leath began to manufacture living room furniture and opened a salesroom at 72 S. Grove Ave. about 1905. He also moved his factory and repair shop to larger quarters on National St. about the same time. In February 1907, Leath incorporated for the purpose of manufacturing furniture. In the summer of 1907, Leath bought a large factory building at 312 Slade Ave., a former shoe factory and gum factory.

With the salesroom at 72 S. Grove Ave. becoming cramped with the rapid growth, Leath bought the 3-story building next door at 74 S. Grove Ave. in 1908. Also in 1908, the firm began to make furniture for the wholesale trade, in addition to the retail trade. In 1909 Leath expanded into the manufacturing of dining room furniture and mattresses and expanded its sales territory to five upper Midwest states – Illinois, Iowa, Michigan, Wisconsin and Indiana. Also in 1909, Leath issued a complete home furnishings catalog and entered into the mail order business, which quickly proved successful. By 1911, Leath had acquired the property at 70 S. Grove Ave. to expand its retail store to three adjacent storefronts at 70-74 S. Grove Ave.

In 1911, the firm’s mail order business had doubled from the previous year, requiring Leath to build a large warehouse at 60 Ann St., which had access to a railroad side track, a necessity since so much of its furniture was shipped out of town. The firm was now doing mail order business in every state in the country.

By 1915 Leath had developed into one of the major furniture establishments in the Midwest, with a profitable mail order business and a large traveling sales force. That year, however, Arthur Leath began to phase out the mail order operation and entered into the chain store field, opening stores in Rockford and Aurora. As soon as managers were trained and tested by experience, Leath stores were opened in cities all over the upper Midwest.

About 1920, Leath moved its mattress manufacturing to a building at 450 Dundee Ave. and remained in operation there until about 1930. Continued growth required more factory space and in 1925 the former Duty Motor Co. plant at the south end of Raymond St. was bought and remodeled. The old factory at 312 Slade Ave. was closed and razed in 1929. By the mid-1920s, Leath was employing over 125 at its two Elgin factories and about 25 more at its Elgin store and warehouse.

Arthur Leath’s untimely death in 1927 led to a company reorganization, with the main offices relocating to Rockford. By 1931, the Leath mattress and furniture factories had shut down, victims of the deepening Depression. In 1933 the retail store relocated from 70-

74 S. Grove Ave. to 26 DuPage Court and then, in 1940, to 164-66 E. Chicago St., where they remained for the next 60 years.

Arthur Leath was born August 29, 1877, in Lanark, Illinois, to John Summerbell Leath (1845-1926) and his wife Anna (1850-1906), both natives of England. His siblings were Gertrude (1879-1970; Mrs. Leonard W. Hawken; later, Mrs. George W. Bond); Pearl (1886-1966; Mrs. Harry Webb); and William Harrison (1888-1958). In June 1900 the family was living in Dixon, Illinois, where Arthur is listed on the census as an upholsterer, and his dad as a blacksmith.

Arthur came to Elgin in 1902 and a year later opened his upholstery shop. On November 24, 1904, he married Mabel Walsh (1870-1958), a divorcée and an employee of the watch factory. Mabel was born in Wisconsin and had been an Elgin resident since the mid-1870s, the daughter of George and Abbie Naylor. Mabel's first marriage, to Louis Walsh, a fellow watch factory employee, lasted five years (1892-97). In January 1919 Mabel was granted a divorce from Arthur on grounds of desertion since December 1915. The couple had no children.

In 1912 Arthur was chairman of the "Made in Elgin" exhibit committee, sponsored by the Elgin Commercial Club (now, Elgin Area Chamber of Commerce). He did such a good job of promoting Elgin manufacturers that he was elected president of the Commercial Club for the next three years (1913-16) and had to refuse to be re-elected for a fourth year due to business obligations.

In the spring of 1920, Arthur bought a luxurious Lake Geneva home known as "Hillcroft," which included a remarkable 415 feet of lakefront and 20 acres of secluded land. Soon after that, on May 12, 1920, Arthur married Grace Andrews (1896-1983) at "Hillcroft." Grace was a 1914 Elgin High School graduate and had been an assistant secretary at the Elgin Commercial Club when Arthur was president there. In 1919 she had moved to Chicago to study harp and voice.



A. Leath



Arthur and Grace Leath

Soon after his marriage to Grace, Arthur bought another showplace home, this one in Elgin, for the couple to live in – the former William Hintze mansion at 557 E. Chicago St. (razed 1962). Arthur had leased this home the year before with the intention of using it to exhibit his furniture displays. Arthur and Grace had one child, Gloria (1925-30), who died of epilepsy at age five.



Leath home, formerly at 557 E. Chicago St.

On May 11, 1927, at Elgin's Sherman Hospital, Arthur passed away due to peritonitis, which resulted from a ruptured appendix eight days earlier. He, Grace ("Gracia") and Gloria are buried in Bluff City Cemetery with a unique sofa-styled monument.



Sofa-shaped Leath family monument

Following Arthur's death, Grace sold her Lake Geneva home to a Chicago steel manufacturer, who quickly resold it to Philip K. Wrigley, the chewing gum manufacturer and Chicago Cubs owner. It remained in the Wrigley family until 1981, when the new owner demolished it and built a new home on the site.

In 1928 Grace sold her Elgin home at 557 E. Chicago St. to Dr. Frank Griffith, who lived there for the next 30 years. Grace remarried in June 1929. She, daughter Gloria and her new husband, Charles M. Hall, a wealthy retired automobile lamp manufacturer from Detroit, moved to Palm Beach, Florida. Arthur's first wife, Mabel, married Fred Ringo in 1929 in Colorado, but had returned to live in Elgin by the late 1940s. Like Grace, Mabel is also buried in Bluff City Cemetery under the Leath name, but not in Arthur's plot.



Leath and employees in 1906, in front of Leath's retail shop at 72 S. Grove Ave.

The group photo shown above is from 1906, and was taken in front of Leath's retail shop at 72 S. Grove Ave. Arthur Leath is in the back, third from the right. Jacob Downs is on the far left and the Rauschenberger brothers, Ernest and Carl, are on the far right.

Jacob later went on to start his own furniture upholstery and repair business. According to his son Benjamin, Jacob Downs did upholstery work for some of Mark Dunham, one of the individuals featured in this year's Cemetery Walk. Mr. Downs did some fancy upholstery for the horsedrawn coaches at Mr. Dunham's Oaklawn Farm in the village of Wayne.

Acknowledgments: Mike Alft's books and newspaper articles; obituaries and other newspaper articles; Leath family research by Carol Huntoon; Ancestry.com; Newspapers.com research by Laurel Garza; federal censuses; city directories; various Internet sources; monument photo by Judy Van Dusen; etc.

The Origins of WGN Radio

By Maurice Dyer

The genealogy of popular radio station W-G-N extends back to May 19, 1922, and there is an Elgin connection in the story.

On that date station WDAP, then owned by the Midwest Radio Central, Inc., was first licensed by the Secretary of Commerce to operate with the most power then allowed, 1,000 watts. A year later WDAP was purchased by the Chicago Board of Trade and subsequently by the Whitestone company, owner of Chicago's Drake hotel, on top of which the station was located. The Tribune acquired WDAP from the Whitestone company in 1924.

The license issued by the Secretary of Commerce to The Tribune on July 15, 1924, changed the call letters of station WDAP to W-G-N and authorized the use of 1,000 watts of power. The Tribune operated station W-G-N on the Drake hotel under this lease until Jan. 11, 1929, at which time it purchased the transmitting equipment.

On Oct. 2, 1925, The Tribune and its subsidiary, Liberty Weekly, Inc., purchased from Charles A. Erbstein two broadcasting stations: WTAS and WCEE, both located at Villa Olivia near Elgin, Ill. WTAS at that time operated with 2,500 watts power and WCEE with 500 watts. WTAS had regular live broadcasts from Villa Olivia, or from an Elgin dance hall Erbstein also owned called The Purple Grackle. The WTAS call letters were changed to WLIB, and W-G-N and WLIB alternated on the same broadcast channel, 990 kilocycles (kHz), until in 1927 they were shifted to the clear channel of 980 kHz and five months later to the clear channel of 720 kHz upon which W-G-N is still operating.

On Oct. 2, 1926, a new 10,000 watt transmitter was placed in service. On Nov. 3, 1928, W-G-N commenced transmitting with 25,000 watts of power. The consolidation of the three stations, W-G-N, WLIB, and WTAS, into one station, W-G-N, was accomplished on Sept. 26, 1928.

On Oct. 16, 1928, the Federal Radio Commission issued a license to the consolidated stations under the call letters of W-G-N, authorizing the full-time use of the 720 kilocycle (kHz) channel.

On March 29, 1934, a new 50,000 watt transmitter for W-G-N was put in service with a gala two-hour program for the public in the grand ballroom of the Drake. The celebration continued for another three hours via remote control programs.

ELGIN HISTORY MUSEUM
360 PARK STREET
ELGIN, IL 60120



Gala 2022 Planning

We have a wonderful evening planned for our Annual Gala on October 29. To make it a real success we welcome participation from our members and friends of the Museum.

We are in need of gift cards from local merchants and restaurants. These gift cards will be included in Mystery Wine Bags for purchase at the gala.

If you have an idea for a themed gift basket and would like to create one for the auction, it would be appreciated. Cash donations are always welcome to purchase items required to complete the evening. We need your donations by October 1st so final plans can be made. Contact the Museum or call Kathy Walters at 847-826-7126 with any questions.

Collections Corner

A recent donation to the Museum collection is this first place trophy won by W.F. Heuman. The bicycle race took place on Oct. 1, 1892 and was part of the National House Athletic Club's field day event.

The race was reported in the Elgin Daily News and was described as "on the home stretch Heuman ran away from the entire field and his victory of Thorn, one of the best wheelman in the west is an occurrence of much significance." The Museum thanks Paul and Stacey Herrmann for their donation.

