

# The Crackerbarrel



## Elgin History Museum News January 2024

### President's Report

*Anne LoCascio, President*



Hello Museum Members! We're glad to have you with us in 2024! Before we jump into to what's happening in the next couple of months at the Museum, I wanted to take a moment to reflect on 2023.

Thanks to your support, the Museum is in a solid financial position to start 2024. The finance committee, led by Treasurer Bill Briska, continues to make wise decisions regarding the endowment fund started in 2000. By design, a portion supports yearly operations and a portion grows to support future endeavors and Museum needs.

The program committee, led by Al Walters, met the challenge to create fun and successful fundraising events as we transition the Annual Gala from November to April. The four events of 2023 (Elgin Trivia Night, Scavenger Hunt, Wine Tasting and the Santa Photo Sessions at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House) brought in over \$12,000. The Santa event took place on two days, and over 80% of the time slots for Santa photos were booked. For a first-time event, that is amazing attendance, and it also provided community outreach. People came who were not familiar with the Museum, and were excited to learn about it.

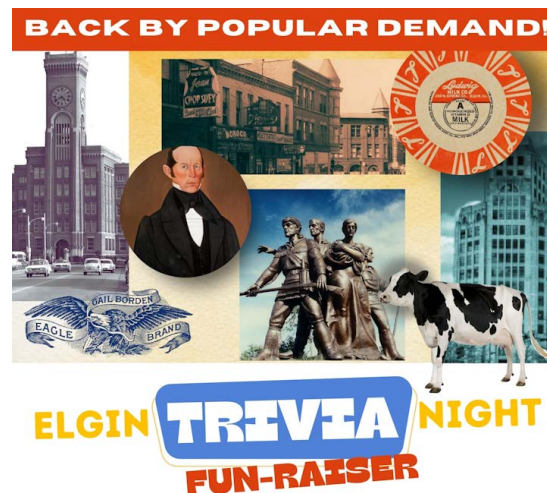
Under board member Tricia Grosser's continued guidance, Giving Tuesday was another success, raising over \$11,000 for the Museum. This fundraising brings in donations from outside our usual base of members. It is also a way for the Museum to be part of the global Giving Tuesday movement.

Lastly, I would like to welcome our newest board member Mary Kemerling. She is a life-long resident of Elgin. She's been an active Museum member, volunteering and staffing events, and we are pleased to welcome her to the board.

### Welcome New Members!

- Rosalie Bozan (gift membership from Sandi McClure)
- Mark Coleman
- Max Michelson
- Jill and George Moore
- Kathy Quintanilla

### Elgin Trivia Night is Back!



Shake off the holiday haze and get your brain in shape for Elgin Trivia Night! The Museum hosted more than 20 teams at last year's event, and

the feedback was so positive, we will be playing again on January 26. Grab your friends to create a team of up to four people. Play rounds of Elgin trivia with topics ranging from people, places, and even some of the Museum's artifacts! The last round allows players to gather their points and wager a little or a lot on the FINAL question. Do you have the nerve and knowledge to bet it all? Cash prizes for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd place. Wine and beer, light snacks, and dessert will be served. \$20 Members / \$25 Guests. All proceeds benefit the Elgin History Museum.

## The Crackerbarrel

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360 Park Street, Elgin, IL 60120  
Phone 847-742-4248  
e-mail: [museum@elginhistory.org](mailto:museum@elginhistory.org)

President: Anne LoCascio  
Vice President: John Devine  
Secretary: Christen Sundquist  
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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.  
Next deadline February 20, 2024

Visit our website [Elginhistory.org](http://Elginhistory.org)

**March 10, 2:00 P.M. - 3:00 P.M.**

### **National Park Service Places in Our Region with Dr. Norman Moline**

The National Park Service (NPS) sites in Illinois and surrounding states include National Monuments, National Trails, National Heritage Areas and Corridors, National Historic Landmarks (88 in Illinois), and sites on the National Register of Historic Places (over 1,900 in Illinois). Dr. Moline will highlight places to experience cultural history at significant but less-known NPS sites in the vicinity.

**April 20, 5:00 P.M. - 9:00 P.M.**

### **Museum GALA at Elgin Holiday Inn**

#### **Martina Mathisen presents Chicago in the Roaring 20s**

Enjoy dinner, drinks and entertainment while supporting the Museum! Martina Mathisen will present Chicago True Stories of the 1920s, saturated with surprise, sequins, and murder! A fun and funny flapper named Flora tells how fashion, crime, and Prohibition mixed with explosive creativity shaped the decade of the century. More info to come.



## Upcoming Events

### *Al Walters, Program Chair*

Check the website for current information. Events take place at the Elgin History Museum unless otherwise noted.  
[elginhistory.org/events](http://elginhistory.org/events)

**January 26, 7:00 P.M.**

### **Elgin Trivia Night FUNraiser**

**\$20.00 members/\$25.00 guests**

Test your knowledge of all things Elgin! Enjoy snacks and drinks. prizes will be given to the top three teams. Visit the website for tickets:

<https://elginhistory.org/shop-category/admission/>

**January 30, 6:30 P.M. - 7:30 P.M.**

### **Gail Borden Public Library**

#### **History of Gail Borden Public Library**

Museum board member Jerry Turnquist will speak at the Gail Borden Public Library, which is celebrating its 150th year in 2024. Hear how the library grew into the premier institution it is today. Please register on the library's website

**February 11, 2:00 P.M. - 3:00 P.M.**

### **Pre-Civil War Quilts: Secret Codes to Freedom on the Underground Railroad**

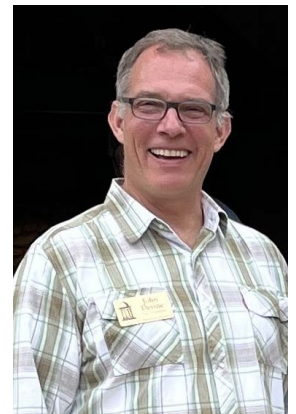
Connie Martin, M.A. will share stories passed down from her Great-Grandmother Lizzie of how her family survived the antebellum period, and how they used quilts that contained hidden codes and secret messages to assist abolitionists guiding slaves to freedom through the Underground Railroad to Canada.

## Meet Vice President John Devine

Museum Vice President John Devine is a recently retired Elgin High School history teacher who joined the Museum Board of Directors in 2021.

He has been an active member of the Cemetery Walk Committee and will be co-chairing the 2024 Walk with his wife, Ana Devine.

John began serving as Vice President in 2023 and heads the Nominating Committee. John also helps occasionally with student programs and created a comprehensive history of Elgin High for the 150th anniversary



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# Thank You Donors

## General Donations

Martha Beattie in honor of Bruce Cook	Marge Krueger
Betty Brown	Delores Nelson
Ann Chipman	George and Marge Rowe
Maurice Dyer	Steve Rauschenberger
Linda Eder	Steve Wasilowski

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## Giving Tuesday Donors

Allerton, Lorraine	Koss, Michael
Anderson, Jim and Sara Ellen	LaFleur, John and Trish
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Barry, Christopher and Jan	Lee, Maureen and Tom
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Briska, Luann	Marston, Emma
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Brown, William H. & Sally	Marston, Steven
Brown, Aaron & Denise	Marston, William Brown
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Gregory, Mary and Martin	Roxworthy, Dennis
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Grosser, Kimberly	Rush, Carrie
Grosser, Maureen (in honor of her mother- employer-matched)	Schroeder, Judith
Grosser, Jeffrey and Tricia	Selin, Eric
Harris, Ricky	Stern, Ashley
Hokenson, Tom	Stroud, Laura
Hyser, Susan	Sundquist, Christen
Jocius, Patricia and James	Tomsha, Doug
Kemerling, Mary and Tom	Turner, James
Kerr, Susan	Walters, Alan and Kathy (company-matched)

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# The Joseph Spiess Co. of Elgin

## *David Siegenthaler, Museum Researcher*

The Joseph Spiess Co. department store (1920-84) on S. Grove Ave. was one of Elgin's main downtown retailers for most of the 20th Century. The others included the Ackemann Bros. department store (1895-1993), Sears, Roebuck & Co. (1928-80), the J.C. Penney Co. department store (1920-83) and the F.W. Woolworth & Co. variety store (1914-83). The demise of all of these retailers between the years 1980 and 1993 reflects the decline of Elgin's downtown as a shopping destination.

Joseph Spiess bought the George M. Peck department store (38-40 S. Grove Ave.) in 1920, while Peck was having it rebuilt following the devastating tornado in March 1920. The Spiess store, like the Peck store it replaced, prospered and in 1948-50 it expanded to the south, doubling in size. In 1968-69, after buying the former S.S. Kresge store to the north, its address became 32-52 S. Grove Ave. In 1984, however, when Elgin's downtown was in an irreversible decline, the Spiess store left Elgin and relocated in West Dundee's Spring Hill Mall. Corporate offices remained in Elgin until 1993.



## *Joseph Spiess store on S. Grove Avenue, 1953*

In 1991 the Spiess Co. filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection. In 1993 the firm was sold to Maurice L. Rothschild & Co. of Skokie and retained the Spiess name. In 1994 Maurice L. Rothschild & Co. itself filed for bankruptcy protection. Soon after that, in 1994, the Joseph Spiess Co. closed their West Dundee store. The Spiess Co. had expanded to three other sites between 1976 and 1988, but all closed between 1992 and 1996. These were located in Crystal Lake (1976-96), St. Charles (1980-95) and Mount Prospect (1988-92).

The Spiess Co. building in Elgin was acquired by an Elgin-backed development group in 1993 and leased to the Children's Discovery Museum in 1994-95 before being sold to Promac Inc. in 1995. In 2005 the building was torn down and replaced by condominiums.

Joseph Spiess' father John (1850-1932) was born in Wurttemberg, Germany, and in 1866 emigrated to America at age 16, settling in Peoria. There he apprenticed as a harness-maker and at age 19 became a lay minister in the Apostolic Christian Church. In 1873 in Peoria he married Rosene Richt (1842-1903). He and Rosene subsequently lived in Gridley, Morton, and Cissna Park before moving to Elgin in 1886.

By this time, John was an expert harness-maker. After a year working at Henry Muntz's Elgin Saddlery & Harness Co. he opened his own shop, which he operated until 1912, when he sold it to Henry Groh. John then became a real estate dealer and also sold steamship tickets. He lived at 558 Franklin Blvd. and later, 639 Park St. Both homes still stand. John Spiess married twice more after Rosene died in 1903. In 1908 he married Elizabeth Reuter (1842-1912) of Cissna Park. After she died, he married Pauline Merz (1862-1948) of Elgin in 1914.



John and Rosene had five children: Wilhelmina ("Minnie"; 1875-1926; Mrs. Jacob Stettner); Mary (1876-1964; Mrs. Charles Schambach); Emily ("Emma"; 1879-1964; Mrs. William A. Stettner); John F. (1881-1936; wife: May Schaller); and Joseph Charles (1884-1964; wife: Edna Lagerstrom).

Joseph Charles Spiess was born in Cissna Park, IL in 1884 and came to Elgin with his family in 1886. He attended school only to age 13, when he began working in his dad's harness shop. He then worked about six months at the Illinois Watch Case factory but returned to the harness shop when his dad needed him there.

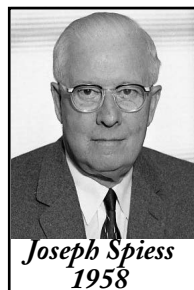
At age 17 in 1901, Joseph was hired as a stock boy at Ackemann's department store. He quickly and efficiently performed all of his tasks and was given increasing responsibilities. By age 19, he was pretty well established in

the Ackemann organization and began to focus on advertising. He soon became Ackemann's unofficial advertising manager and his wages were raised to reflect that.

At age 22 in 1907, Joseph's enthusiasm and ambition led to a restlessness. He applied for employment with Carson Pirie Scott & Co. in Chicago and was hired. After a year or so, W.D. Ackemann visited him in Chicago and successfully convinced him to return to Ackemann's, offering a very generous incentive package. Joseph was saving most of his money and it accumulated rapidly. He lived with his dad and was single until age 34. His dream was to save enough money to buy his own department store and he had his eye on George Peck's store. Peck was an aging retailer who let it be known that he would sell for the right price. In 1912 Joseph negotiated with Peck but they couldn't agree on terms. Joseph would have to wait until he could buy the Peck store outright and pay for it in full.

Joseph bought an automobile and in July 1917 allowed some friends to plan a trip to Starved Rock, over 70 miles away over rough, unpaved roads. After a couple of flat tires, the party of four was stranded in the middle of the night on their return trip and had to call ahead to get a new tire to finish the trip. One member of the party was a 20-year-old bank clerk named Edna Lagerstrom. Two years later, in June 1919, Joseph and Edna (1897-1994) were married. Two months before the wedding, Joseph bought his first home, a six-year-old home at 905 Larkin Ave. In May 1920, Joseph and Edna's only child, John Edward Spiess (1920-2011) was born.

The Palm Sunday Tornado, on March 28, 1920, gave Joseph the opportunity he was waiting for. The George M. Peck department store was destroyed. For three months, while a new store was under construction, he and Peck negotiated terms and on July 21, 1920, Peck announced the sale of the store and stock to Joseph. At the same time, Peck, 76, announced his retirement after 52 years as an Elgin merchant. Joseph resigned at Ackemann's, where he had been the firm's second largest stockholder, as well as general manager and vice president.



In 1940, Joseph and his family moved into their new Georgian-style home at 126 Cooper Ave., designed by Elgin architect Elmer Gylleck. Joseph served 43 years as president of the Joseph Spiess Co. and was succeeded by his son, John E. Spiess, in 1963. Gaining state and national recognition as an authority in the retail field, Joseph was one of the founders and first president of the Illinois Retail Merchants' Association.

He was a member of the board of directors of the Elgin National Bank for 44 years and Sherman Hospital for 34 years. He was also a director of the YMCA, YWCA, First Congregational Church, National Retail Merchants' Association, and Illinois State Chamber of Commerce. Joseph passed away on October 9, 1964, at age 79 and is buried in Bluff City Cemetery.



***Joseph Spiess Home, 126 Cooper Ave., c. 1940***

John E. Spiess graduated from Elgin Academy and Northwestern University's College of Commerce. He then served in the Navy during World War II. In 1949 he married Priscilla Joice (1926-99) and they had four children: Anne ("Fanny") Levy, Mary Smith, Joan Julow, and Sally West.



John worked at his dad's store as a buyer and merchandise manager, working his way up to vice president and general manager before succeeding his dad as president in 1963. He served as president of the Illinois Retail Merchants' Association, like his dad, and the Elgin Chamber of Commerce. He was also on the board of the First National Bank and United Way. In 1978 John and Priscilla moved to Naples, FL. He passed away at age 90 in Florida on May 8, 2011, and is buried in Bluff City Cemetery.



***The Spiess family monument at Bluff City Cemetery***

***Acknowledgments: Mike Alft's publications; obituaries and other newspaper articles; Kane County clerk's website; probate files; city directories; "Fox Valley Mirror" (Sept. 1940); Ancestry.com; Findagrave.com; monument photo by Judy Van Dusen; etc.***

## Elgin had its Georges, too

*by Claire Ollayos*

***Originally printed in the Elgin Courier, Dec. 29, 2003***

The holiday season and approach of the New Year is a time for reflection and envisioning the future. It is a time to express love and appreciation to the friends, family and community people who have touched our lives.

In and among the traditional seasonal movies is the classic Jimmy Stewart movie *It's A Wonderful Life*. I happen to be in the camp of people who love this movie, as tremendously sentimental as it is. George Bailey (Stewart), after years of sacrificing his dreams for the family savings and loan business and helping other people first, gets to see, in a moment of despair, what life would have been like if he had never been born.

It occurred to me as I watched it last week for the umpteenth time that Elgin has had its George Baileys, too—only their names were George P. Lord, George Van De Voorde and George Perucco.

That late George P. Lord is known to many for the east side park that bears his name; less well-known is the fact that he donated his home site and was responsible for building in 1906 the Old People's Home of Elgin that we know today as Oak Crest Residence. He was benefactor to many long-time Elgin social service organizations, as chronicled by Elgin historians Mike Alft, Jerry Turnquist and the Elgin Historical Society.

The late George Perucco is known to many as former president of Home Federal Savings and Loan. Like George Bailey, he was willing to take a chance on good people. Ask a number of business women in Elgin who are now at retirement age and you'll quietly hear stories about how George Perucco loaned them money to begin their business when no one else would.

The late George Van De Voorde, former fire chief, former mayor of Elgin, has perhaps most profoundly influenced in modern times the look and the tone of Elgin. The stories about George are legion, but I would like to share just a few.

As fire chief, responding to a call, he preserved the historic facade of the Unitarian Universalist Church on Villa Street by entering through the roof. He, along with the late Dr. Richard Powers, not only started but taught the first Emergency Medical Technician (EMT) program in Elgin that is now part of Elgin Community College.

As mayor of Elgin, he spearheaded the restoration of the Lords Park Pavilion instead of tearing it down, as called for in the architect's plan for redesign of the park. He set in motion the addition of the east wing of Elgin Public Museum 97 years after it was due, as noted in Lord's bequest, and created the Elgin Cultural Arts Commission.

As mayor, his was the crucial tie-breaking vote that brought the Grand Victoria Casino riverboat to Elgin. While we may argue that there have been certain mixed blessings with having a riverboat, there is no question that a number of needed infrastructure improvements and the further aesthetic development of Elgin's riverfront would never have happened without that decision.

The positive ways in which our Georges have touched other people's lives continue to reverberate on both an individual and community basis.

Because of our Georges, and a host of others, we truly do have a more wonderful life.

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## Meet Jim Anderson, Board Member Emeritus



For those who don't know him, Board Member Emeritus Jim Anderson is a retired CPA who joined the Elgin History Museum Board in 2008. He has volunteered as a docent, joined the cleaning/decorating crew, and is an important member of the Finance Committee.

In the 16 years Jim has been on the Board of Directors, he has volunteered as a character in the Cemetery Walk, helped at various events, and contributed financially to the Museum. Jim

follows his wife, Sara Ellen, onto the board. Sara was a pivotal board member when the Museum was started in the 1980s.

### *How did you get involved with the Museum?*

Through Sara Ellen and being a member of the Museum. I put together shelving with the Golden K's in 1997 and attended Museum events and programs.

### *Favorite Thing About Elgin?*

Elgin Community College had an important impact in my life. I was in the second graduating class and was able to transfer and graduate from Northwestern University.

### *Favorite Object in the Collection?*

I am most interested in the early story about Elgin, the Giffords and the Kimballs starting the town.

### *If you could have dinner with someone past or present, who would it be?*

The late Elgin historian Mike Alft.

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## Dairy Wagon Grant

As a bequest, the late Aubrey Neville left an Elgin Sanitary Milk Company dairy wagon to the Museum. The wagon comes from the Nevilles' extensive collection of antique dairy-related items. Elgin Sanitary was the precursor company to Ludwig Dairy.

Recently, the Signal Hill Chapter of the National Society of the Daughters of the Revolution (NSDAR) granted the Elgin History Museum \$1,000 to assist in moving, preserving, and exhibiting the wagon.

It was moved by a crew of Museum volunteers from the Neville's farm west of Elgin to Corron Farm in Campton Township. The plan is to eventually exhibit the wagon in Elgin, possibly at Old Main.

Thank you to Jackie Marcus and the Signal Hill NSDAR for their continued support of history!



*Jackie Marcus presents NSDAR Grant to Museum Curator Beth Nawara*



*Moving the wagon to Corron Farm*

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## Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House 2023 Progress Update

The Cobblestone House was officially dedicated as a neighborhood center for meetings, educational programming, exhibitions and community gatherings on May 6, 2023. In 2023, the space was used 24 times for meetings, rentals, and educational programming, hosting a total of 900 people!

In October 2023, the Cobblestone House was presented with a “Gamechanger” Elgin Image Award. The Museum is looking forward to continuing the activities at the Cobblestone House in 2024 by ramping up its marketing as an event space, expanding the programs and tours available, and presenting an art exhibit there.

During 2023, additional landscaping was planted by the partnership between the Greater Kane County chapter of Wild Ones native planting group and the City of Elgin. Railings were added to the back exterior concrete steps and painting of the back deck began.

Many thanks to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources for the grant that helped build the deck.



*North side of house, showing progress from 2017 to 2023*

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## Santa Event at the Cobblestone House Exceeds Expectations

Thank you to all of the delightful families who had their photo taken with Santa at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House in November. There were kids who behaved well, kids who behaved not so well, people who wanted to sit on Santa's lap, people who wanted Santa to sit on THEIR lap, and plenty of dogs and holiday pajamas. Huge thanks to the volunteers who decked out the Cobblestone with holiday spirit, and those who helped at the event.

Special thanks to professional family photographer Carolyn Buhrow, who volunteered on Saturday, helping to pose people with the correct lighting, and taking some photos. Some fun photos from the event are shown on the back page of this edition.

Extra special thanks to Santa and his lovely family for coming all the way to Elgin to help at our inaugural event. It was so successful, the Museum will hold the event again next November.



*New native landscaping and railings on Crystal St side*

ELGIN HISTORY MUSEUM  
360 PARK STREET  
ELGIN, IL 60120



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