

The Crackerbarrel



Elgin History Museum News September 2024

President's Report



Anne LoCascio, President

Life moves quickly, and when a project is done I often move on to the next thing, without reflecting on an accomplishment. The Museum is no exception to this rule, keeping a busy schedule of events and exhibits that engage the community and preserve Elgin's history. So, to illustrate how your donations and volunteer hours are noticed and appreciated, I want to

relate several compliments the Museum received recently.

During the July 14th Classic Car Show, I ran into an Australian couple visiting friends. The wife told me that she had passed an enjoyable hour in the Museum and was impressed with the depth of information and the celebration of our community. She goes to museums all over the world and felt ours was one of the best she'd ever been to. It warmed my heart that someone from the other side of the globe was so enthusiastic about the Museum.

Over the summer, I had builders in doing my kitchen. I came home one day to a barrage of questions about the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House. I live nearby, so the builders had been passing by the Cobblestone every day. They'd been so curious, they had gone to the trouble to look it up online. They were impressed with all the thought and skill that had gone into the rehabbing of the 1846 structure. It's a testament to the years of hard work by volunteers and area craftspeople that others in the building business take notice.

To cap off the compliments, the Elgin History Museum was named Best Museum (Suburbs) on the *Daily Herald's* 2024 Best of the Best!

Now I must jump into the future: our 37th Annual Bluff City Cemetery Walk takes place Sept. 21-22. This year we have a special themed event tied to the 150th birthday of the Gail Borden Library, featuring residents who encouraged literacy over the past one and a half centuries.

Museum's New Podcast

Rebecca Miller, Museum Educator

We are excited to announce the launch of the Museum's new podcast "Echoes of Elgin: Timeless Tales from the Elgin History Museum." Based on E. C. "Mike" Alft's *Days Gone By* column that was in Elgin's *Courier News* for years, Rebecca adapted Mike's words to a new format. The podcast is available on major platforms, including Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Amazon Music. You can also listen directly on the Elgin History Museum website. <https://elginhistory.org/echoes-of-elgin-podcast/>



If you don't have a podcast app on your device, scan this QR code to listen or contact the Museum for a tutorial. New episodes are released twice each week, so be sure to subscribe and never miss an episode.



Rebecca recording her podcast at the Cobblestone studio

Here are some episodes you won't want to miss:

"The Case of the Missing Elgin JFK Casket"

The body of President John F. Kennedy was transported, but not buried, in an Elgin Britannia casket. What became of that casket? Discover the answer hidden for decades.

"The Last Leaf," about the Elgin farm boy who became the national leader of an organization with five U.S. Presidents among its ranks, and was the nation's largest single-issue political lobby of the 19th century.

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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.
Next deadline October 20, 2024
Visit our website Elginhistory.org

September 13, 6:30-8:30 P.M.

Elgin Symphony Orchestra 75th Anniversary Exhibit Opening

Learn the rich history of Elgin's beloved musical ensemble, from its beginning as a community orchestra to its current status as an award-winning professional orchestra that builds community with the power of music.

Sept. 21, 3:00 P.M. - 7:00 P.M. (tours at 3:00 & 5:30 P.M.)

Sept. 22, 11:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M. (tours at 11:00 & 1:30 P.M.)

Bluff City Cemetery Walk

Bluff City Cemetery, 945 Bluff City Boulevard, Elgin

Visitors are guided on a 70-minute tour of gravesites of former residents portrayed by actors in period costumes. To celebrate Gail Borden Library's 150 years of service, all 2024 characters are associated with literacy, books, or Gail Borden Library. See preview article on page 3.

Tickets \$20.00, online purchase only. Member discount. Check out sponsorship opportunities!

October 4, 6:00-8:00 P.M.

Wine & Halloween Candy Tasting FUN-Raiser

Which wines pair well with Halloween candy? Find out while exploring and supporting the Museum! Sponsored by East Side Cafe in East Dundee. \$30 tickets are available online (\$25 for members).

October 13, 2:00-3:00 P.M.

Annual Meeting and Presentation

Messengers of the Unseen: Mary Todd Lincoln and the Spiritualists, presented by Mike Murschel

FREE for Members / \$5 for guests

Annual Meeting and election of officers (approx. 20 minutes). How did a desecrated grave in Sycamore lead to Bellevue Place where Mary Todd Lincoln was committed for insanity? It's a trail through the Fox River Valley, strewn with riots, seances, generals and detectives, all woven into the veil of Civil War Era Spiritualism.

November 23, 10:00 a.m. - 4:00 P.M.

November 24, 10:00 a.m. - 2:30 P.M.

Photos with Santa at the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House, 302 W. Chicago St., Elgin

The historic Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House will be filled with holiday cheer, the perfect backdrop for your photos. Book a 15-minute time block, and take your own photos in any format you like. Santa will be there to give you all his attention for pictures with children, pets, grandparents or family members. You can also bring other props. Craft activities and small snacks will be available.

More details and registration 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

September 7 & 8: Elgin Historic House Tour

Hosted by Gifford Park Association

www.HistoricElginHouseTour.com

September 12, Noon - 1:00 P.M. Brown Bag Lunch

A Brief History of Immigration to the United States

Edward Bates reviews the laws and trends regarding immigration to the United States from the time of the Founding Fathers to the late 20th century. Emphasizes immigration from Northern Mexico to South Texas during World War I and slightly beyond.

December 7 1:00-2:30 P.M.

Holiday Tea

Mid Century Christmas with Leslie Goddard

FREE for Members / \$5 for guests

Christmas in America from the 1940s through the 1960s meant aluminum trees, department store Santas and TV specials. Every kid wanted an Easy Bake Oven, a G.I. Joe or a Slinky. Look back at this optimistic era in a fun illustrated lecture, using photos, ads, greeting cards and catalogs to explore why this era was a turning point for how we celebrate the holidays.

Cemetery Walk Preview

John Devine, Vice President

It's time to find your walking shoes: the 37th Annual Bluff City Cemetery Walk is just around the corner! This year's walk is rooted in collaboration and connections. Last fall, the Gail Borden Public Library announced their sesquicentennial celebration plans for 2024. This gave the cemetery walk's coordinators an idea: could the Museum join that celebration and feature characters on this year's walk who had something to do with the library, books, and literacy?

Yes! The collaboration began between staff at the library and the Museum. Library leadership and staff opened their archives and volunteered their writing and acting skills. Museum staff and Cemetery Walk coordinators gathered primary and secondary sources and mapped out the route for the seven characters selected for inclusion. Working together on a shared theme has been very satisfying to the many volunteers who have helped with organizing the walk.

We have learned a great deal about our characters. We carefully fact-checked the scripts written by the team, and then asked the writers to imagine what their character's favorite book may have been, and to weave that recommendation into their scripts. The Gail Borden Public Library's bookmobile will be at the walk with copies of the characters' imagined reading recommendations, ready for you to check out!

Here are the Elginites featured on the walk, their imagined favorite book, and some interesting connections between them. You'll have to attend the walk to hear their stories.

- **Katherine Abbott** (*Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain)
- **David C. Cook** (*Ramona* by Helen Jackson): David C Cook's publishing headquarters on North Grove Avenue was previously part of the Lovell family property.
- **Cecil Harvey** (*The Red Badge of Courage* by Stephen Crane)
- **Arthur Newsome** (*Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*): Arthur, Edward Lovell, and Louis Yarwood all served in the Union Army during the Civil War.

- **Edward Lovell** (*The Idiot* by Fyodor Dostoevsky)
- **Abby Wing** (*The Voyages of Dr. Doolittle* by Hugh Lofting): Abby Wing replaced Edward Lovell as principal of the New Brick school when Mr. Lovell joined the Army.
- **Louis Yarwood** (*The Life of an Artist* by Jules Breton) Elgin's Head Librarian, Louis Yarwood, was succeeded by Cecil Harvey (not without controversy) and Ms. Harvey was succeeded by Katherine Abbott, the longest-serving in the library's history.

Get to Know the Board: Sandi McClure



Since moving to the Elgin area in 2014, Sandi McClure has been a fan of the Elgin History Museum. Sandi is from California and was on the Boards of the California State Antelope Valley Poppy Reserve and the Antelope Valley Indian Museum State Historic Park.

She joined the Elgin History Museum Board in 2017 and helps in many ways. Sandi trained as a docent, helps manage the Museum Store, records volunteer hours, and assists with table events around the community, education programs, and the STEPS process. Sandi brings in new members and loves showing guests around the Museum.

A History of Elgin's Springs: Part 1

David Siegenthaler, Museum Researcher

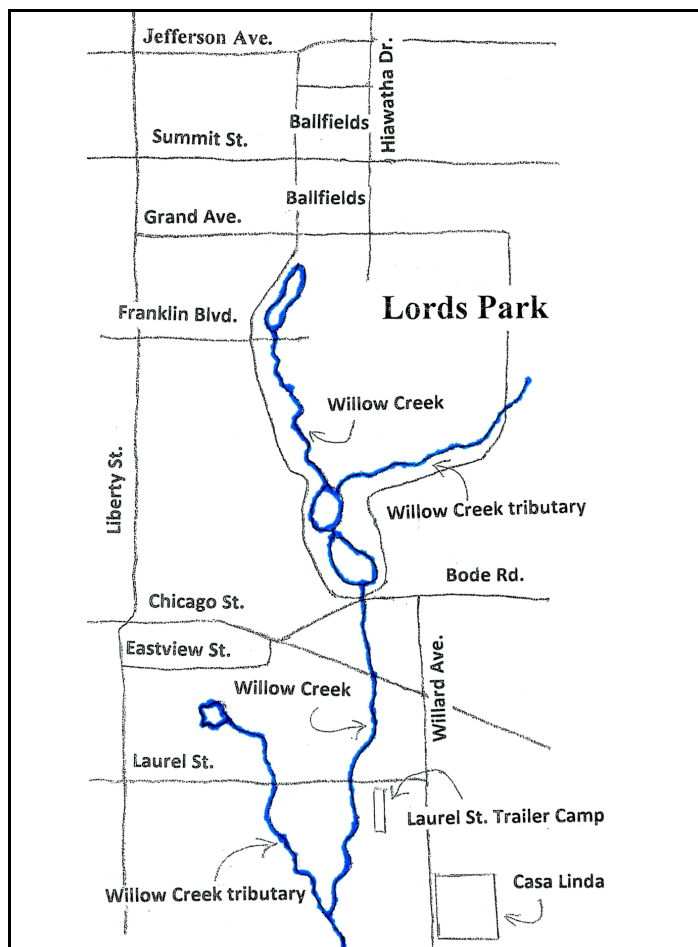
When James T. Gifford founded Elgin in 1835 the dominant topographical features were the Fox River and the numerous small hills and springs. The river and hills, though altered by nearly 200 years of development, are still dominant. The springs, however, except in nature preserves, have all disappeared, buried under several feet of fill. Though not visible, the springs and seeps are still there and occasionally present problems for existing and proposed developments.

Springs and seeps, bubbling, trickling or oozing out of the ground, exist where underground aquifers reach the surface. Though humble in origin, all flowing water in our area, from the tiniest streams to the Fox River, originate in spring-fed wetlands. On their downhill journeys, the streams converge, collecting additional water from spring-fed tributaries, eventually emptying into the Fox River and then into the Illinois River at Ottawa. The Illinois River empties into the Mississippi River which, in turn, empties

into the Gulf of Mexico. As the surface water is heated by the sun it evaporates, forms clouds and then precipitates out, returning to the ground where the cycle begins again.

Elgin is situated in the Fox River Watershed area, which means that all flowing water will eventually drain into the Fox River. The Fox River in the Elgin area has two main tributaries, each with its own watershed area. On Elgin's east side, the Poplar Creek Watershed originates in the Crabtree Nature Center in South Barrington and includes Lords Park and the Bluff Spring Fen. On Elgin's northwest side, the Tyler Creek Watershed originates in several streams just west of Route 47, and includes Wing Park and the villages of Pingree Grove and Gilberts.

On Elgin's southwest side, the Otter Creek Watershed streams originate roughly from Route 47 on the west to Route 20 on the north, and include Bowes Creek, Fitchie Creek, Stony Creek and the Hawthorne Hill Nature Center. The Otter Creek Watershed does not drain directly into the Fox, but merges with the Ferson Creek Watershed, immediately to its south, which does empty into the Fox just north of St. Charles.



Elgin is fortunate to have two nature preserves that include undisturbed natural landscapes, each with numerous springs. The Bluff Spring Fen, immediately south of Bluff City Cemetery, and the Trout Park Nature Preserve, immediately south of the I-90 Tollway, each contain wetlands called fens. The fens are fed by groundwater carrying a lot of

dissolved minerals, mainly limestone (calcium carbonate), that precipitate out when reaching the surface. The highly alkaline water and soil, combined with the year-round water temperature of about 50° F, support rare species of flora and fauna that have evolved to require just such specific conditions in order to thrive. The Bluff Spring Fen streams drain into Poplar Creek, which empties into the Fox River about 0.6 miles to the west. The Trout Park streams drain directly into the Fox River.

In Lords Park, Willow Creek emerges from the ground just south of Grand Ave. and flows south through three man-made lagoons, created by damming up the creek. Willow Creek, a 1.6-mile long tributary of Poplar Creek, continues to flow south where it merges with Poplar Creek near the east end of Jay St., south of Villa St.

Several underground springs directly north of Lords Park combine to form wetlands in the area that is now occupied by ballfields on both sides of Summit St. The waters converge to form the source of Willow Creek. A federally-funded public works project in the 1930s leveled the wetlands north of the park, adding much fill, which created flooding in adjacent fields. Drainage pipes were installed underground to relieve the flooding and drain the water into the creek. After heavy rains, flooding still occurs at the low-lying intersection of Hiawatha Dr. and Jefferson Ave., just north of the ballfields. Another small spring-fed stream, a Willow Creek tributary, flows into the middle lagoon through a ravine from the northeast.

Once a popular site for recreational and competitive ice skating, the lagoons have not frozen solid enough to permit skating since the 1970s. The Lords Park Manor Subdivision north of the park, and the Parkwood Subdivision east of the park, both developed in the late 1960s, created drainage issues. The amount of water draining into the creek, its speed of flow, its temperature, its salinity and its nutrient and sediment load all increased, raising the lagoons' water temperature.

In the 1950s, the lagoons were stocked with fish and each summer hosted fishing derbies that attracted hundreds of kids. Fishing in the lagoons has been banned now for decades. The accumulation of sediment has made the lagoons shallower and promoted the growth of algae, which deplete the water of oxygen needed by the fish.

About a quarter-mile southwest of Lords Park, between Laurel St. and Eastview St., east of Liberty St., is a spring-fed pond. This drains into Willow Creek about a quarter-mile to the south. Flooding is a persistent problem in this low-lying area in the Poplar Creek flood plain. An 1889 newspaper article noted that "the great hole on Laurel street" will begin to be filled in with "three thousand yards of earth."

Two ill-fated housing communities in this area have disappeared due in large part to the flooding. The Laurel Street Trailer Camp was a collection of 29 trailers near the east end

of Laurel St. Many poor Black families lived here in squalid conditions between the years 1953 and 1964. Less than two blocks away, on the east side of Willard Ave., a complex of 14 apartment buildings that became known as “Casa Linda” was constructed in the early 1960s. Flooding was a continual problem at Casa Linda and by 1995, when the entire complex was razed, Elgin's mayor called it Elgin's “only real ghetto.” In 2009, the Casa Linda site was reclaimed as a city park when the “Prairie Park” was opened. Flooding is also a recurring problem in the Hammond Ave. area, where the city has been buying and clearing flood-prone properties, a short distance before Poplar Creek empties into the Fox River.

Elgin's east-side business district was originally a swampy network of springs and streams. This low-lying marshy area, combined with the frequent flooding of the Fox River, was the reason that founder James T. Gifford proposed that the center of Elgin's commercial district be located up the hill at Center (so named as the proposed commercial center) and Chicago streets. Within a few years, however, businesses began locating down the Chicago St. hill, closer to the river, as well as on low-lying streets parallel to the river. By about 1850, the center of Elgin's commercial district was at “Market Square,” where Chicago St., Grove Ave. and Douglas Ave. all converge. Because this area was often flooded, the street levels had to be raised.

One source estimated that there were once a half-dozen streams that flowed into the Fox River between Kimball St. and Prairie St. By the end of the 1800s, all had disappeared, buried under earth and gravel or drained through underground channels, to provide dry building sites for homes, businesses and streets.

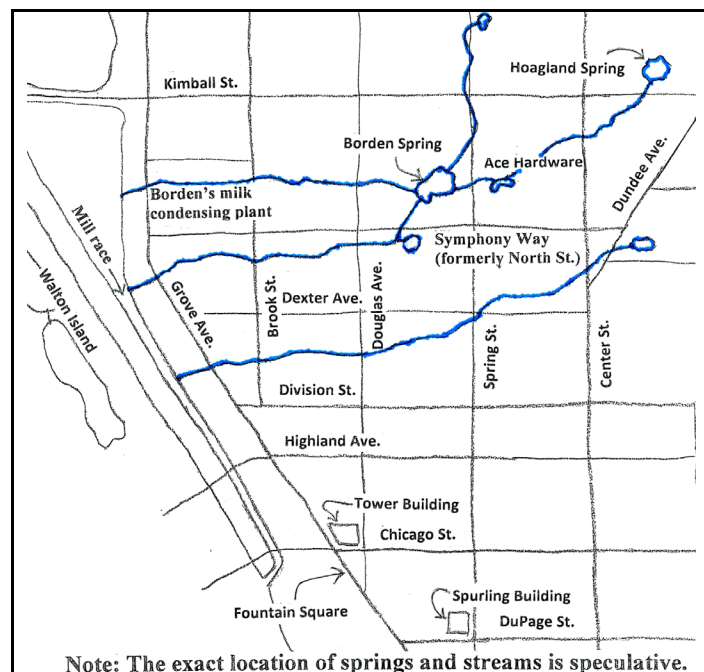
One of the larger downtown springs, the Hoagland Spring, was located just north of Kimball St., between Center St. and Dundee Ave., and was about 15-feet across. In three or four places near the center of the spring, water continuously flowed freely, forcing up sand and air bubbles. The water from this spring flowed southwest across the block now occupied by the Ace Hardware store. The Ace building closest to Spring St., even today, has structural problems due to the underground springs. The cement slab floor is sloped due to settling and requires extensive stabilization.

The stream flowed across Spring St. (named for the springs) and merged with other springs to form the large Borden Spring, near the northwest corner of Spring and North (now Symphony Way) streets. The Borden Spring provided water for the milk condensing plant two blocks to the west, where it was piped into a large reservoir and used for cooling milk. In 1873 the condensing plant erected a large wooden building to cover the reservoir of spring water and piped some of the water 1,500 feet downhill to Market Square, where the city installed a fountain. Thus, “Market Square” became “Fountain Square.” In 1919, months after the condensing plant closed, the Borden Spring property was

bought by Oscar Ludwig, who built a milk bottling plant on the site and planned to continue to use the spring water to cool milk.

One stream, known as the P.J. Kimball brook (one of the streams after which Brook St. was named), flowed into the river somewhere north of Division St. Division St. was so named because it was the dividing line between land owned by J.T. Gifford to the south and P.J. Kimball to the north. More specifically, the property line in legal documents referred to the mouth of the P.J. Kimball brook beginning at the river and running easterly. Originally this land was low and marshy and considered to be of very little value. By the 1880s the land had been reclaimed and made valuable, with extensive improvements. In 1889 litigation among property owners made the exact location of the stream material, as their property rights depended on it. However, the most definitive descriptions were vague, given that long ago the creek had been turned into an artificial underground channel and all of the original landmarks were gone.

Sometime in the mid-1800s, the draining of the wetlands began. A stormwater sewer was constructed a few feet below the surface from the Fox River to Dundee Ave. between North St. (now Symphony Way) and Kimball St. In 1909 the sewer line was rebuilt and lowered. In the 1930s, a federally-funded public works project enlarged and deepened this sewer line. Seven-foot diameter pipes were installed 20 feet underground. One source reported that while digging the trench there were a dozen places where unexpected springs gushed up floods of water.



A few blocks to the south, at the northwest corner of Spring and DuPage streets, A.B. Spurling began construction of his 5-story commercial building in 1892. At the time, this was not only Elgin's tallest building but also its first steel-framed building. The site was a spring and sand bog that required

extensive piling (support beams driven into the ground) to support the building's weight. Likewise, in 1928, when construction began on the 15-story Tower Building on Fountain Square, the builders found that the bedrock was so far below the surface that extensive piling would be necessary. 340 steel and concrete pilings were driven through the gravel base to depths ranging from 35 to 42 feet, upon which steel and concrete piers were built to support the superstructure.

To be continued ...

Rolling Devils Car Show

George Rowe, past President

On Sunday, August 4, the Heritage Commission held their annual car show in the parking lot at Riverside Drive and Grove St. The Rolling Devils car club has sponsored the show for the past three years.

This show is separate from the Museum's annual July car show. The Heritage Commission started this show a couple of years ago with a small event of about 15 cars. This year there were 160.

The car that caught everyone's attention this year, was a 1920 Elgin 6 owned by Rodger Wilson for the past four years. The Elgin automobile was manufactured by Elgin Motor Car Corporation in Argo, Illinois, from 1916 to 1923, and by Elgin Motors, Inc., in Indianapolis from 1923 to 1924. Approximately 4613 cars were produced in 1920. Total production was 16,784 over an eight-year period from 1916 until 1924 when the company went out of business.



1920 Elgin Auto made in Argo IL

Members of the Elgin National Watch Company Board of Directors apparently reasoned that if they could manufacture watches, why not cars? The Elgin Motor Car Corporation was formed by board members and utilized slogans like "Built Like a Watch" and "The Car of The Hour." The board bought a car factory in Argo (now Summit) IL that was going out of business. The building still stands and has "Elgin" in stone above the doors.



1920 Elgin 6, with owner Rodger Wilson. Interested? This one may be available.

Sales peaked at over \$7 million in 1920, but the recession of the early 1920s damaged the company and it relocated to the former home of Federal Motor Works in Indianapolis. By June 1924 the company went bankrupt.

At the car show, the Elgin 6 took the honor of Best in Show (Stock). My nephew Mike, an automotive engineer in Michigan, provided these statistics:

- Selling price of the car in 1920 was \$1,665, about \$49,568 today. The average price of a new vehicle in 2024 is \$48,008.
- The Elgin 6 had a 207 cubic inch straight six engine (3.4L) producing 37 horsepower. Today a 3.5 liter V-6 produces 300 to 350 horsepower.

Rodger has been interested in the Elgin Auto brand for some time and believes there are fewer than 15 vehicles remaining from the eight years of production. This one is in great shape—thank you, Rodger.

The Heritage Commission contributes to the car show to heighten their exposure in the city. Much of the cost of putting on the show is donated by individual sponsors.

The Heritage Commission plaques historic houses, disperses funds through the City Council for historic rehabilitation grants, and is responsible for the annual Mayor's Awards, presented in May, preservation month. The Commission recently received a national award from the National Alliance for Preservation Commissions for Best Practices in Protection Award.

Darren Handel is the current president of the Rolling Devils car club. Darren's father started the club back in 1956!

Neon Art On View

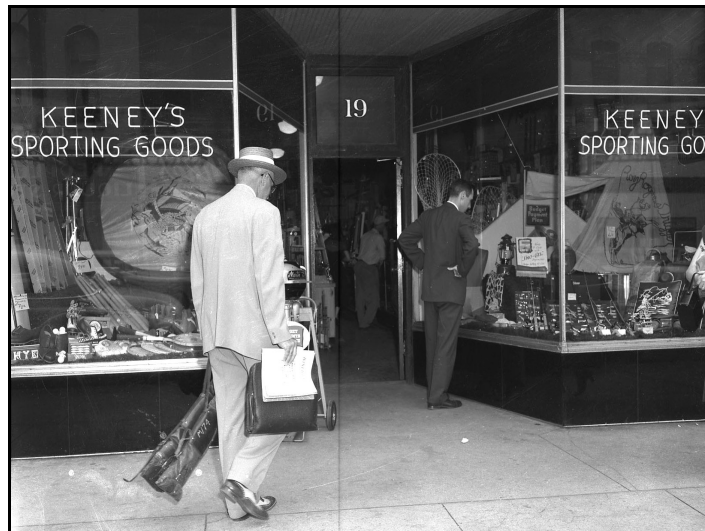
The Keeney's Sporting Goods neon sign, restored by Olympik Signs of Lombard, is now on display at the Museum! Keeney's was an Elgin institution for 127 years. Located last at 19 Douglas Ave., Keeney's began as a drug store in 1883, selling sporting goods as a sideline. In 1934 they discontinued the drug business, becoming one of the first sporting goods-only stores in the state.

The neon sign was donated after Keeney's closed in 2010. The store was known to generations of Elginites as the place for school gym uniforms and letter jackets.

The Keeney family helped bring Little League Baseball and Pee Wee Football to Elgin. Jacque Keeney led the effort to install lights at the Trout Park fields and was inducted in the Elgin Sports Hall of Fame for his dedication to youth sports.



Restored neon sign from Keeney's Sporting Goods store



The sign's original location, 19 Douglas Ave., circa 1950

Now on YouTube: History of LeeWards

Linda Rock's Brown Bag Lunch on the History of LeeWards and its Merchandise is now on YouTube. Linda also shares pieces from her own collection. Check it out!
<https://youtu.be/6IXQW16Kxqk>

Welcome New Members

Nancy Burnidge	Marianne Nelson
Maureen Kelley	Anna Rosales
Maribeth Leidinger	Cheryl and Ed Vucsko
Natalie McQueen	Jim Vyleta
John Muirhead, NEW Life Member!	

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Collections Corner: Road Race Photographs

Beth Nawara, Museum Curator

The Museum's Collections Committee recently received several photograph albums that included images from the 1910-1914 Elgin Road Races, different than those already in the Road Race collection. One image (below) shows nurses alongside the course. There are clues about the photographer's identity, but more research is needed.

