

The Crackerbarrel



Elgin History Museum News July 2025

President's Report



Anne LoCascio, President

As part of our outreach for the Hispanic Heritage Project, the Museum manned a table at the Downtown Elgin Farmer's Market last month. The Downtown Neighborhood Association filmed us for inclusion in their videos promoting family activities in downtown Elgin.

We had our spinning prize wheel there, always a guaranteed hit with children. As an art director by day, I was absolutely fascinated in the real-time market study of who chose what as a prize. Hands down, the sticker utilizing Cristina Colunga's artwork for the project was the favorite of the girls. The boys gravitated to the architectural drawing of the museum done for last year's Explore Elgin's Stick and Stay campaign.

But the best market survey information I got was when the kids who landed on Choose Your Own Prize chose a free Museum pass! It was so gratifying to hear the 9-12-year-olds say, "We love the museum!" One set of girls even turned to each other and said, "We can go there together over the summer!" It pleased me to no end to hear them making plans to visit the Museum.

On the topic of community engagement, I also cannot overstate how glad I was that the Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House was packed to the eaves on June 6 for the kickoff event of the Hispanic Heritage Project. The brainchild of project chair Cristina Colunga was to hold an open house for the *Erasing Borders / Borrando Fronteras* art exhibit. The low estimate is 85 attendees, ranging in age from 6 to 80. The weather was perfect, and the crowd spilled out onto the deck and down into the parking lot for food from Sammy's food truck, staying well past the 8:30 close time. There were many community members new to the Museum, excited to see inside Nancy's house and to support community artists. It makes me even more excited for the premier next year of the documentary and exhibit.

Elgin's Timeless Homes: Charles Cassell Paintings

Experience the charm of Elgin's historic homes through the vibrant artistry of local architect and watercolor artist Charles Cassell, whose work is now on display in a special exhibit at the Museum.

The exhibit showcases a collection of paintings depicting the architectural beauty, heritage, and variety of homes in Elgin. Mr. Cassell's architectural skills enable him to create highly accurate, detailed home portraits. This special exhibition will be on display in the main exhibit room on the second floor, and is well worth a visit to the Museum this summer.



Welcome New Members

Paul and Jane Duffy
James Galvin
Karin Jones
Cindy Laine

Cheryl Landwehr
The Sexton Family
Sandra Whitmer

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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.
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Visit our website Elginhistory.org
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Sept. 11 12:00 Noon - 2:00 P.M.

Brown Bag Lunch: Chicagoland Neon Signs with Nick Freeman
FREE for Members, \$5 for guests. Bring your lunch; soft drinks and dessert provided.

Sept. 27 3:00 P.M. and 5:30 P.M.

38th Annual Bluff City Cemetery Walk Celebrating the centennial of U.S. Route 20.
Enjoy an outdoor theatrical performance and the beauty of Bluff City Cemetery while learning about the longest road in America. 4 showtimes to choose from.

Sept. 28 11:00 A.M. and 1:30 P.M.

Annual Business Meeting with Ellie Carlson as Phyllis Diller

Nov. 22 9:00 A.M. - 4:00 P.M.

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

Nov. 23 9:00 A.M. - 2:00 P.M.

Holiday Tea at the Museum

Dec. 6 2:00-5:00 P.M.

2025 Events Calendar

Al Walters, Program Chair

Check the website for current information. Events take place at the Elgin History Museum unless otherwise noted.
elginhistory.org/events-calendar

July 12
Car registration: 9:00 A.M. TO 12:00 P.M.

Open to Public 10:00 A.M. - 3:00 P.M.

Museum Car Show
Rain Date Sunday, July 13 10:00 - 3:30 P.M. CDT
FREE event and admission to the Museum Car Registration \$15 per vehicle; all vehicles displayed on grounds must be registered. Open to all years and makes: Stock or modified cars, trucks, and motorcycles. Awards ceremony 3:30 P.M.
Live music by Rick Lindy and the Wild Ones plus Flat Creek HWY! Cesaroni Real Pit BBQ food truck.
Sponsored by Roxworthy Enterprises.

July 17 12:00 Noon

Brown Bag Lunch: Alan Walters presents the Elgin Road Races along with a new Road Races exhibit! FREE for Members, \$5 for guests. Bring your lunch; soft drinks and dessert provided

July 28 @ 5:00 - 7:00 P.M.

Elgin Arts Happy Hour
Nancy Kimball Cobblestone House
Free admission. A monthly gathering for area creatives and arts supporters, in partnership with Side Street Studio Arts, open to all. Donations accepted.

August 21 12:00 Noon - 2:00 P.M.

Brown Bag Lunch: Elgin History Revisited with Jerry Turnquist
Jerry will share his favorite stories from his longtime Daily Herald history column. FREE for Members, \$5 for guests. Bring your lunch; soft drinks and dessert provided.

Sept. 6 and 7 9:00 A.M.- 4:00 P.M.

43rd Annual Historic Elgin House Tour Presented by Gifford Park Association
Explore 8 homes on the west side of Elgin. Tickets \$20 Adult / \$15 Seniors 65+.

Thank You Donors

General Donations

Dave Bosely	Ricky Harris
Charles and Penny Cassell	Dan and Lynne Walters
Ann Chipman and Greg Kuepfer	Ralph Westphal
Mark and Deb Coleman	

Monthly Donations

Evan Fry
Rudolph and Lillian Galfi
Patricia Harkin

The Fox River in Elgin: A History, Part 2

David Siegenthaler, Museum Researcher

Fox River Waterworks

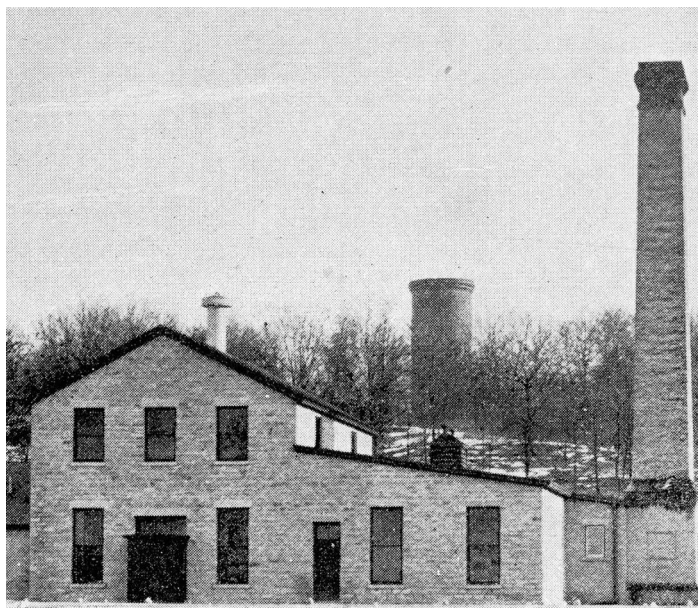
The Fox River in Elgin was not initially a source of drinking water. From the time of Elgin's founding in 1835 until the city's waterworks system was completed in 1888, residents relied on natural springs and shallow surface wells for drinking water. However, these water sources sometimes became contaminated with microorganisms that caused typhoid fever, tuberculosis, cholera and other deadly infectious diseases. Especially dangerous were springs and wells that became contaminated by nearby sewage and cesspool water. As late as the 1880s, about one of every three children born in this country died before the age of five, and infectious disease was a major cause.

Another incentive for developing a city waterworks system was to assist in firefighting. It offered a reliable and plentiful source of water distributed through water mains to numerous fire hydrants located in all areas of the ever-growing city. The horse-drawn fire engines of that era could couple their hoses to nearby hydrants and, if the water pressure was sufficient, effectively fight fires.

In 1873, the state legislature authorized municipalities to construct and maintain waterworks. As a rapidly growing city in the 1870s and '80s, Elgin's city council felt increasing pressure to provide a water supply sufficient for domestic use and fire protection. By the mid-1880s, the city had already rejected several private corporations' proposals. In January 1887, the city council concluded that Elgin should control its own water supply and approved an ordinance to build and maintain a waterworks.

Three potential water sources were carefully analyzed and compared for purity: a stream in Trout Park; a natural spring on the west side; and the middle of the Fox River north of the sewer outlets. Fox River water was found to be superior. Deep well water was not initially considered due to the cost and uncertainties about quality and quantity.

In 1888 the waterworks, which consisted of water mains (wooden pipes), hydrants, pumps, and reservoirs, was built on the east bank of the river, north of Slade Ave. A pipe was laid out 100 feet into the river, with the other end in a reservoir at a lower level so that water flowed by gravity into the reservoir and kept it full. The water in the reservoir was filtered through sand but was not otherwise treated. It was pumped into a standpipe (525,000-gallon capacity water tower) 200 feet above river level and then sent through the mains. The mains extended throughout the city, including beneath the Fox River to the west side. The standpipe not only served as a reservoir but also provided water pressure.



Slade Avenue Pumping Station, 1891

After the standpipe, which was at the northwest corner of Spring St. and Cooper Ave., collapsed in 1900, the pumps had to work continuously to provide water pressure until a new water tower was built in 1913 on the west side along Shuler St., near Commonwealth Ave.

The 500,000-gallon tower on Shuler St. was replaced in 1993 with a 2-million-gallon tower on Shales Parkway on the far east side. Elgin's oldest existing water tower, built in the 1960s on Airlite St., is also the only multi-legged tower in the city.

In early Elgin, factories were located along the Fox River for the water power and emptied their industrial waste directly into the river and raceways. Human waste was disposed of in backyard privies. The first sewers were in the business district and then extended into residential areas after the city established the waterworks in 1888. All of the sewers poured unfiltered raw waste directly into the river.

A report of the Elgin Sewer Commissioners in 1899 concluded, "it is certain that the discharge of the city's filth into the Fox River ... is fraught with danger to the health of the people, and ought to be discontinued as soon as possible." Mayor Arwin Price agreed it was unhealthy but argued that the Fox was "the natural sewer created by Almighty God for that purpose and that purpose alone." In order to keep the Fox for this purpose he urged for the conversion of Elgin's drinking water source from the river to artesian wells. An artesian well is a deep well bored into an underground aquifer to access water, which then rises due to natural pressure to the level of the water table.

By the turn of the century, the Fox River had become alarmingly polluted due to the increasing number of sewers discharging into the river here and upstream. City water had become discolored, bad-tasting and potentially dangerous. In 1900, the Elgin Physician's Club advised against continued use of the Fox as a source of drinking water and endorsed artesian wells. In April 1902 Elgin voters agreed.

Between 1901 and 1903, four deep wells were drilled at the pumping station to a depth of about 1,800 feet. The system included two 1.5 million-gallon ground reservoirs; tunnels 115 feet underground connecting the wells with the reservoirs; and pumping machinery with engines on the surface. The reservoirs were cemented wells, each 125 feet deep. Because the artesian well water rose to within 25 feet of the surface, the reservoirs were kept full by the force of gravity. The water was then pumped from the reservoirs into the mains.

By early 1905 the artesian well system was in full operation and, for the first time, 100% of Elgin's "city" water came from deep wells. The well water was a constant 56°F and had a distinct sulfurous odor, which was mostly eliminated by aeration before being pumped into the mains. The amount of well water, however, could not keep up with the

demand and soon river water was being mixed with the well water, particularly in the summer when demand usually doubled.

Chronic shortages, discoloration, disagreeable taste and low pressure continued to plague Elgin's city water system for the first three decades of the twentieth century. To conserve the supply and reduce the content of river water, meters were made mandatory in 1907 and sprinkling bans were often issued during dry periods.

In 1920, the state health superintendent warned that a typhoid fever epidemic was likely if the city continued to use untreated river water. That year use of chlorine began to disinfect the river water, but water quality issues continued. Finally, in 1929, the state ordered the destruction of the river suction lines, which meant that the city now had to make do with only well water. Several surface wells were drilled but capacity and quality were unsatisfactory.

A turnaround came under the direction of William Trentlage, water commissioner from 1931 to 1943, who had much experience as a well driller. In 1931-32, the steam-driven pumps were replaced with much more efficient electrically-driven pumps, nearly quadrupling pumping capacity. In 1931 a deep well was drilled at Shuler St., boosting capacity. Shallower wells at Lavoie Ave., St. Charles St., Crighton Ave. and elsewhere supplemented the water supply.

From 1936-38, a new treatment plant, partly financed by federal public works funds, was built at the Slade Ave. pumping station. This facility used scientific treatment methods to remove sediments and odors, as well as to soften the water by reducing mineral content.

As Elgin grew, expansion of its water system kept pace. In 1947 a second treatment plant was completed at St. Charles St. and in 1964 a third plant was opened at Airlite St. Population growth steadily depleted the Elgin area's deep well water table, and as the water table dropped, the more it cost in electricity to pump water to the surface. Foreseeing an eventual shortage, the city council in 1976 voted to return to the Fox River for its water supply rather than participate in a costly Lake Michigan pipeline project.

The Fox River by this time was much improved in terms of water quality. Fox River communities now all had sewage disposal plants that removed pollutants that previously discharged into the river. Increased ecological awareness in the 1960s and '70s resulted in laws and regulations to clean up our waterways.

The Riverside water treatment plant was built just north of Judson University and began pumping river water in 1983. It treats river water and well water and replaced the treatment plants at Slade Ave. and St. Charles St. After an expansion completed in 1999, the Riverside plant's capacity was 32 million gallons of water per day. The Airlite St. plant is still in service but its capacity is less than a quarter of Riv-

erside's. In 1990, the old Slade Ave. treatment plant was razed and a new facility was built in its place, housing the Water Department's meter division. It also still serves as a pumping station.



Riverside Water Treatment Plant Aerial View

Today, Elgin is fortunate to have an abundant water supply that provides it with the capacity to service new residential, commercial and industrial development, as well as to sell water to the neighboring communities of Sleepy Hollow and, until 2019, Bartlett. The Fox River provides about 90% of Elgin's water supply, with the remainder drawn from deep wells.

Fox River Sanitary District

When Elgin converted from river water to deep wells at the turn of the last century, the urgency to deal with the issue of Fox River pollution lessened. However, the pollution only worsened as the city grew larger. As early as 1894, when Elgin's city council passed an ordinance "to provide for the adoption of a system of sewerage," the need to come up with a plan was recognized. Elgin's sewer commissioners spent years studying the issue and visiting other cities to learn how their systems worked.

The gas works was a major industrial contaminator. Oils and tar were released into the river, sometimes spreading over the entire width of the stream and covering its bottom with two inches of waste. Beginning in 1913, the state of Illinois repeatedly warned Elgin about the public health menace created by allowing sewage and industrial waste to flow into the river. Neighboring cities downstream also protested, and St. Charles threatened a suit for damages.

One of the reasons Elgin did not correct this situation was a financial predicament caused by a constitutional limitation imposed on the bonded indebtedness of municipalities. The solution came in 1917 when the state

passed a law allowing for the creation of sanitary districts that had their own bonding power and could serve a natural drainage area regardless of municipal boundary lines.

A member of the city council, Morgan Brightman, took the lead in advocating the creation of a sanitary district to serve Elgin. "Sooner or later, Elgin will have to go back to the Fox River for its water supply," he correctly predicted. "Even now, the river is undesirable for bathing, boating or fishing. There is danger of a bad epidemic arising from this source."

Voters authorized the Sanitary District of Elgin in 1922 and the sewage disposal system was constructed from 1924 to 1927 along the river at the south end of the city, off Raymond St. It was independent of the city, although city sewers were hooked up to trunk lines of the district system. The original boundaries included the entire city of Elgin, the unincorporated community of Illinois Park and small sections of land adjoining the city. In 1965, the Sanitary District accepted the village of South Elgin, the second-largest community in Illinois without a sewer system, into its area of operation.



Sanitary District Plant, 1978

In 1990, the Sanitary District of Elgin became legally known as the Fox River Water Reclamation District (FRWRD). It now serves Elgin, South Elgin, West Dundee and parts of Sleepy Hollow, Streamwood, Hoffman Estates and unincorporated St. Charles Township. The FRWRD operates three treatment plants: the original plant off Raymond St.; the north end plant at Clifford Ave.; and the Dana Drive plant in South Elgin.

To be continued...

In Memoriam: Wally Niedert 1928 – 2025

By John Huber, EHS Class of 1959



His full name was Raymond Wallace Niedert but everyone called him Wally. Born on August 27, 1928 in Elgin, IL, he graduated from Elgin High School (EHS) in 1946. Wally was 96 years old when he died on February 27, 2025 in Salt Lake City, UT.

He was the backbone of the Elgin High School Western Reunion held in Fresno, CA. What began as a cross-class reunion for EHS grads primarily living in California quickly expanded to those living in the Western states. Wally intently generated a telephone and e-mail list to include as many EHS grads as he could locate.

The first reunion was held at the Ramada Inn in Fresno, CA in May 1984. Records show 230 people attended. The next four reunions were held two years apart in 1986, 1988, 1990 and 1992 – all at the Ramada Inn in Fresno. In 1992 Wally decided to hold another reunion one year later in 1993. The group continued to meet annually in Fresno until 2014.

Attendees were encouraged to bring their EHS class yearbooks and other Elgin items of interest. Such items were displayed in the "Memorabilia" Room at the Ramada. Wally brought yearbooks from other classes. Many attendees also brought their own editions so others could look for relatives and friends. Besides yearbooks, many Elgin history books filled the tables in the room.

Wally continued to live in Salt Lake City with his wife Joann after the reunions ended in 2014. He entered hospice in early 2025. Wally is survived by his eight children and their spouses.

Wally, my friend, rest in at peace. You gave us quite a ride!

A Pocketful of Style and a Snootful of Hooch

by Maureen Thoren

The tuxedo-clad man sits at a casino table, dealing cards. His hands win time after time, while the beautiful woman across from him gets the losing cards. Perturbed, she writes a check to cover her bets. The man leans in and says, "I admire your courage," and she replies, "I admire your luck, Mr....?"

"Bond, James Bond," he says, as he opens his gunmetal cigarette case and lights up using his matching lighter. I was mesmerized by the entire scene. As a sheltered eleven-year-old girl from the south side of Chicago, this was the first time I had ever seen a tuxedo, a casino, or a cigarette case. I leaned over to my older cousin and said, too loudly, "Why does he have his cigarettes in a case?" She hissed, "Because he has style and good taste, now shut up."

Everyone else at the theater on that day in 1962 was concentrating on Dr. No, the first 007 movie, so I shut up and watched, thoroughly fascinated. That cigarette case was a thing of mystery.

Cigarette cases were something new only to me. When machine-made cigarettes became available in the late 1800s, metal cases to hold them soon followed. When the Elgin American Manufacturing Company (EA) was established as a subsidiary of the Illinois Watch Case Co. in 1898, they undoubtedly started making cigarette cases to satisfy the need for a dry, protective container for smokes. Initially, many EA cases were constructed of sterling silver and gold. EA's engravers skillfully added loops, whorls, and juggernauts to the beautiful cases. Cases were sleekly designed so they did not catch on the fabric when taken out of pockets. Also available were cases decorated with subtle lines in red or gold, or with a machine-turned or stamped design. A gold wash was sometimes added to the inside for further embellishment.

In the movies, actors like Humphrey Bogart and William Powell reached into a suit jacket pocket to pull out a cigarette case. Cases also were kept in pants hip pockets for convenience or when the gentleman was working and did not want to place a soiled hand into a clean jacket.

The earliest cigarette cases pictured in Howard Melton's book, *American Compacts of The Art Deco Era*, were silver in color, measured about 3" x 4", and held approximately ten cigarettes. EA designed and patented a unique cigarette holder located at the case's hinge, which popped up when the case was opened. The gadget held several cigarettes upright, to be easily plucked as the need arose. This rare model was named the Elginator. The designers at EA were brilliant at improving designs for everyday objects.

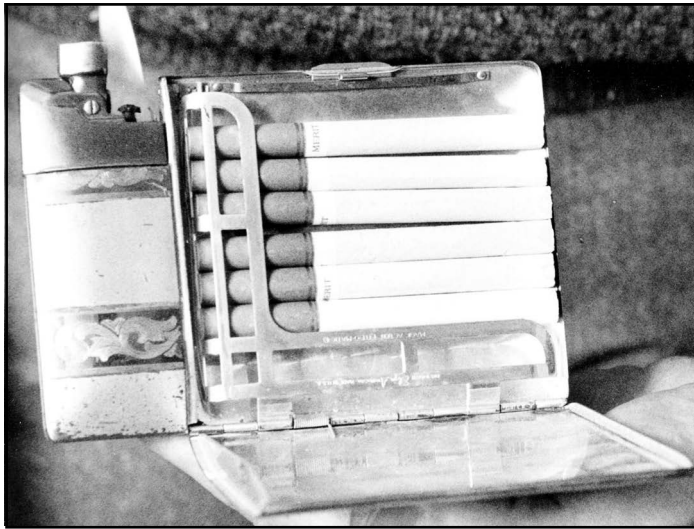


Elginator cigarette case with holder, patented 1917

Many cigarette cases were made in the geometric Art Deco style, which became popular in the late 1920s. EA embraced this style enthusiastically, and captured the public's interest with the style's startling departure from traditional designs. Traditional designs were also made likely until the company's last days. True Art Deco designs morphed into Streamline style as the public's taste changed.

Lighters were also made by Elgin American. Lighters could be purchased individually and to match cases, and through the Art Deco period of the late 1920s, some lighters were integrated into the cigarette case at the top so that the lighter was always right where it was needed. Lighters were a very important product for EA as well as for other companies, which could contract with EA to have their own logos attached to lighters for marketing programs. Today, we can find EA lighters emblazoned with logos from Cadillac, Dodge and even the Chicago Auto Club.

In 1953 EA began advertising their patented Magic Action lighter. In this design, the lighter flipped open from the case when the case was snapped shut, making it more convenient to press the trigger button for the flame. A later innovation, dubbed Lite-O-Matic, went a step further, automatically sparking the flame when the case was closed and the lighter was in position. Thousands of these lighters survive and are quite decorative.



Magic Action or Lite-O-Matic lighter

Tabletop lighters manufactured by EA were stylish and lovely, and many survive to this day. Metal, glass and porcelain table lighters were made to fit every decorating style, many sold as sets with matching cigarette boxes or open holders. EA marketed directly to consumers via ads in newspapers and magazines, radio, and later, on television.

Besides watch cases, locket, cigarette cases, lighters, vanities, powder cases and pressed powder compacts, other EA products included boudoir sets, comb and brush sets, razors, desk sets, silverware, jewelry, pocket knives, sterling belt buckles, and another personal favorite, flasks.

Flasks for “hooch” were used during automobile rides, sporting events, picnics and other activities. EA made flasks before and during Prohibition (1920-1933), as documented by inscribed dates on surviving examples; some of which are made of sterling silver and are quite expensive. It is also likely that EA made flasks from their patented metal, Elginite, which would have been less costly. EA offered flasks in three sizes; one model was named Hercules.



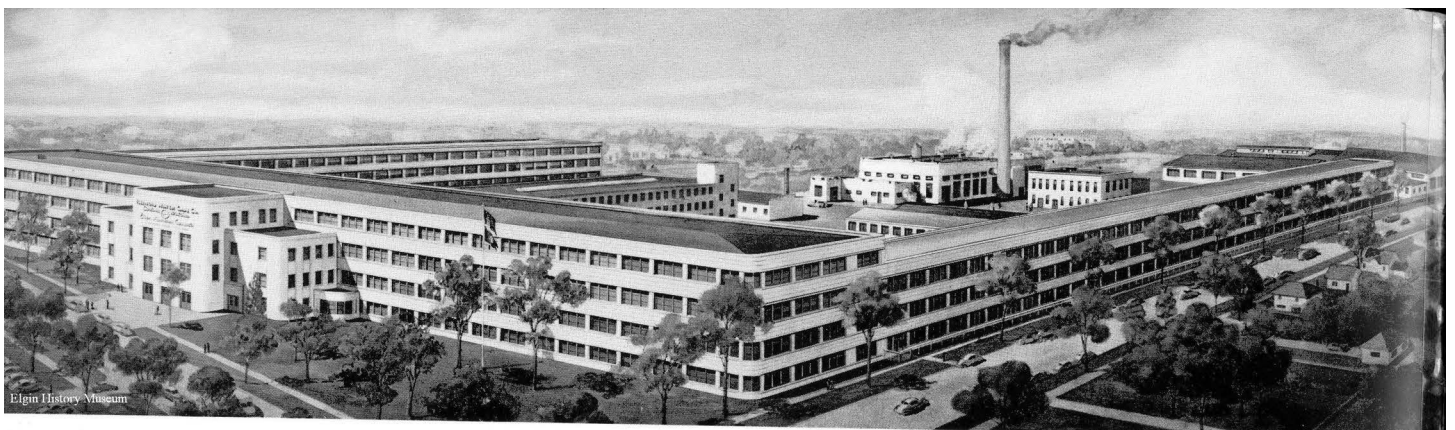
Hercules 16 oz. silver-plated flask

EA used large quantities of precious metals in manufacturing. Around 1910, the company was using 50 pounds of gold a week. Gold bars came from New York. Silver arrived at the factory in the shape of small loaves of bread. The company was making 2,000 watch cases every day. As a major supplier of watch cases and other metal goods, marketing its products worldwide, EA helped put Elgin on the map as a center of quality manufacturing.

All of this work took place on the large, empty block bordered by Dundee Ave., Slade Ave., Liberty St., and Chester St. The original building at 853 Dundee Ave. was built in 1890 and many additions were made to it. The first watch case was produced in August 1890. Elgin American survived until the early 1960s. Then, the building was repurposed for other companies' offices and manufacturing, including Simpson Electric Co. The building was demolished in 2011.

If you are driving past the empty lot at Dundee and Slade, take a moment to think about the millions of treasured watch cases, stylish cigarette cases, and vanity items made there, which eventually became family heirlooms and objects of fascination. Elgin American certainly left its mark in the realm of beautiful, handcrafted workmanship.

*The author thanks David Siegenthaler and staff of the Elgin History Museum, Howard Melton, co-author of *American Compacts of the Art Deco Era*, and Richard Renner for their assistance with this article.*



Illinois Watch Case/Elgin American Building, formerly located at Slade and Dundee Avenues (Elgin History Museum image)



Watch City Shipyard Sign

by Jeff White

October 6, 1994 was the first day that the Grand Victoria riverboat casino “sailed” on the Fox River. That inaugural “voyage” was the culmination of months of work building the boat at the Watch City Shipyard.

South Grove Avenue was known for decades as Automobile Row. As dealerships needed more space, they relocated east to Chicago Street. Buildings along South Grove were slowly bought up and torn down until only the Watch College and Bunge’s remained.

When the casino was approved, Automobile Row became a shipyard. The two blocks of S. Grove north of National Street were closed off with chain link fencing and gates at either end. Each gate had a sign identifying the Shipyard. And that is when I got interested as an Elgin collector. During the summer of 1994 I wrote a letter to the Superintendent of the Shipyard, requesting the opportunity to obtain one of the signs. I never got a response.

Living east of downtown meant hearing the banging and clanging of the shipbuilders every day. When I realized the noise had stopped, I drove to the site and saw the fence in a huge pile with one of the signs in view. I parked my car, hustled to the sign, and started detaching it from the fencing using only my car key and my bare hands. Bending the metal wire that held the sign in place took all of my concentration; I did not see the security guard approaching, who shouted one word: STOP!

I explained what I was doing and why I thought it was important to save this sign. The guard was not interested, but directed me to the superintendent’s trailer to ask permission. It was soon obvious that I would not be allowed to continue for safety reasons. Then the trailer door opened and a “boss” entered, wanting to know what was going on. “You want that sign? I remember that letter. Sure thing. Go get it.” And I did.



Shipyard sign from the White Rock collection