



ROYAL OAK

Historical Society

JULY 2020 • ROYALOAKHISTORICALSOCIETY.COM



Photograph courtesy of the Royal Oak Historical Society Museum

Our annual August Car Show has been canceled due to Covid-19.

We hope to see you next year.
Thanks to all of our past supporters who have made this event happen!

ROYAL OAK
Historical Museum

1411 West Webster Road
Royal Oak, MI 48073
royaloakhistoricalsociety.com
(248) 439-1501

Due to Covid-19, call for hours.

Remembering Royal Oak in the 1940s

by Don Calder, ROHS volunteer

My memories of the 1940s start on December 7, 1941, the day Pearl Harbor was attacked. I was five years old. It was a warm December. For some reason, I remember my Dad's 1936 Chevy being at Grant School, which I attended.

We lived on Kenwood, three blocks east of Campbell Road, just north of Lincoln. The Brinkey farm still existed at Lincoln and Stephenson. Mr. Brinkey plowed our Victory Garden with his horse and hand plow. There was a pear orchard on the corner of Lincoln and Campbell where the Fresh Market now

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→ **What's up with the Museum? See Page 4**

Royal Oak in the 1940s • Continued from Page 1

stands. That market was the first Hollywood Market in 1950. Three brothers and their stepfather operated the store.

There was a swamp on the northwest corner. I had my butt whipped for chasing rabbits into the swamp because I crossed Campbell Road when I was five or six years old. There were big ditches along Lincoln, east of Campbell, and open fields and woods a few blocks east of Campbell. Sporadic homes were on Edison, Dorchester, Kenwood, and Edgeworth. Wild strawberries and blueberries were abundant and free for the picking. A failed excavation on Dorchester resulted in a pond where we could capture pollywogs, build boats, and tempt drowning.

I remember tagging along with my dad at about age six while he hunted pheasants at Fourth Street and Stephenson. It was open fields going north from there. One neighbor did his hunting from his basement window on Kenwood.



Don Calder (left) and his brother, Bill, around 1946-47 at their family home on South Kenwood. Photograph courtesy of Don Calder Sr.

ROYAL OAK *Historical Society*

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My dad was an air raid warden during World War II. We had practice blackouts, where we closed the drapes and turned off the lights while he and the other wardens made sure everyone's house

was dark. He missed the draft because he was too old at age 36. He had been cleared for the Navy and was quite disappointed to be disqualified at the last minute; Mom was happy. One pastime was to drive down to the State Fairgrounds at Eight Mile and watch the German prisoners playing basketball.

With WWII in progress, it was important that I bug my parents for a wooden rifle from Kresge's. I carried that rifle for the duration of the war and was quite concerned when the war ended. What would be my role?

My dad had a 1936 Chevrolet until 1950. Gas rationing and tire shortages kept us close to home. Every spring, dad insisted on getting stuck on our muddy dirt street. We also got stuck on Campbell just north of 11 Mile, which at the time was also a dirt road. Rationing also limited sugar, meat, whiskey, and other items. And candy was in short supply. If we shopped at Pentescu's Market (which became the D&D Market later) at the corner of Kenwood and Fourth Streets, Anna Pentescu might slip a couple of Hershey bars into your bag, from her sneaky stash, if you were a good customer.

There was a large empty storage tank on the corner of Fourth and Kenwood. It had a small oval opening. One time we crawled inside and built a fire. When I think back now, we could have died.

I remember a fairly large building being torn down at the corner of Washington and Fourth on the southeast corner. A Kinsel's drugstore replaced

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Homes & Buildings in Royal Oak

EDITED BY JOHN S. SCHULTZ

In each issue, this feature focuses on historic homes and buildings in our city. The selections come from the book, "Royal Oak Images, Yesterday's Charm Today's Treasures," published by the Roundtable of Royal Oak Historical Organizations, a standing committee of the Royal Oak Historical Commission of the City of Royal Oak. The book was published in 2006, and a second edition is in the works.

We encourage other Royal Oak residents to share the history of their home for possible publication. For more information, contact John S. Schultz at jsschultz11@gmail.com.

Schmidt House

2725 North Main Street

Arts and Crafts Bungalow Built in 1911

The Schmidt house at 2725 North Main Street is believed to have been built in 1911 by the Lloyd family. The style is English Arts and Crafts or possibly a Tudor-style Craftsman. The half-timbered gable above the full-width porch proudly expresses this English theme. Originally, the entire house was shingled. Above the concrete block foundation, the exterior walls flare out. Thankfully, this Craftsman feature was retained when the house was sided, probably in the late 1950s.

The windows reinforce the English theme. Diamond-pattern windows frame the two front picture windows at the top and sides. A ribbon of three casement windows makes up the bays on either side. Each of these has a decorative upper panel that is divided crossways and diagonally, intersecting in the middle, forming a simplified Union Jack. This design is carried over to the double-hung windows on the second floor. Additionally, these windows are flanked by two small closet windows that were sided over but remain intact.

The large front door opens into the living room, with the dining room connected by a classic Craftsman arch made entirely of red oak with tapered pillars trimmed in egg-and-dart molding. Red oak is used throughout the house, from the two-inch flooring to the box-beam ceilings. These beams still have the original light fixtures of a four-petal flower gracing each intersection.



The simple yet unique profile on the baseboards is also used to trim all the windows, doorways and various built-ins. The living room brick fireplace, long since painted, rests in the middle of the house providing a circular walking flow from room to room.

Following another tradition of the Arts and Crafts movement is the dining room buffet. Built into the bay window it combines buffet and windows in a grand manner. The glass front buffet doors have been replaced with stained glass that mirrors the other diamond panes in the room. Crowning the buffet is an extra large molding with grooves on top to display plates and other wares. The beautiful woodwork in these two rooms is probably why they have survived true to their Craftsman roots while the rest of the house has seen major updates through the years.

President's Message

Record Your Own History

By Bob Muller

We seem to be moving into an open-up phase of the Covid-19 pandemic. As of this printing, the Museum is closed to assure that Centers for Disease Control protocols are properly in place.

Nothing like this has happened in our lifetimes, so we are living through history. The closest historical reference we have is the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918, long enough ago that there are only a very few living people to ask what it was like. But we have a tremendous amount of remembrances from both doctors and the general population that were written down and preserved.

Now is our time to write even a few paragraphs about the effect of the pandemic on our lives. Maybe you still worked and had the risk of bringing it home to your family. Maybe, like me, it has been three months without seeing my grandchildren. This will happen again maybe 100 years from now. It is important to be able to read how the lives of ordinary people were affected. We would love to hear from you!



WOODWARD MEMORIES
If approval is given to reopen the Museum, the annual "Woodward Memories" exhibit — a historical look at businesses and life along this iconic highway — will be on display from August 1 to mid-September. Call ahead for hours and watch for Facebook and e-mail updates.

Royal Oak in the 1940s • Continued from Page 2

it. We had two Cunningham Drugs stores in downtown Royal Oak — one on Washington and one on Main. Montgomery Ward was our big department store at Fourth and Washington. Streetcars connected us to downtown Detroit. I thought they turned around on a swivel at Catalpa and Main, but I can't verify that. Most people think they backed into a siding. At Christmas time, Mom would take us on the streetcar to see the "real" Santa Claus at Hudson's. We stopped in Highland Park to see the assistant Santa Claus at Sears. The final stop was to see another assistant at Montgomery Ward in Royal Oak.

I remember the three movie theaters. The cost was 16 cents for the Royal Oak and Washington, and 14 cents for the Main. I preferred to go Friday night with a stop at Mary's for a burger and malt. Mary's was where Nutri-Foods is now located, on the west side of Main just south of 11 Mile and two doors north of Second Street.

The Martin Bus Line was on all the main roads. I knew all the drivers. I always asked, "How much?" Sometimes they said two cents or three cents or five cents or "Shut up and just go sit down." My recollection is that no two of their buses looked alike. That may be an exaggeration.

Don says he "lived and worked in the last century, back when it took 10 hours to get to Grayling in a 1930 Model A Ford and when a single-dip cone was five cents."

Nellie Davis was our pharmacist on East Fourth Street. She also served as substitute doctor and soda jerk. Horner's meat market was next door on Fourth. Occasionally they would sell us a piece of beef without ration stamps. There was a live chicken market across the street. You picked out your bird, and they cleaned it. Andy Crumb's barbershop was next to Horner's. He had been located behind the bank on Fourth and Main and subsequently on Second Street just west of Main. I got my BBs from Smith-Crampton Hardware on Fourth and Center streets for five cents. Johnson's Sweet Shop next to Cunningham's on Main Street was our official stop after a movie. At one time, we had three dime stores — Kresge, Neisner's, and Woolworth. Watching the doughnut machine at Kresge's was a highlight on my trips to town. King's Gun Shop was also a favorite stop.

After WWII ended, there was a building boom in my neighborhood. Our open fields and woods were replaced by homes for returning GIs and their families. 1950 was a significant end of an era for me. Dad bought a used 1949 Chevy, we got a black-and-white 10-inch TV, and we moved into middle class — sort of. I had finished my second paper route and started working at Hollywood Market as a stock boy and bagger. It was big money at 30 cents an hour.

Don Calder has lived in Royal Oak for nearly 80 years. Married to Adair, the couple raised two children. Don worked at General Motors in an engineering group for more than 40 years.

Royal Oak Then & Now

BY JOHN MAURICE, ROHS FACEBOOK EDITOR

The building at 916-930 North Main Street has stood since 1924. For the first 81 years of its life, it housed a furniture store — first Edward Furniture followed by Harper Furniture. The Edward Furniture Company was organized in 1923 with a store in Detroit, soon to be joined by the new Royal Oak location. When the Detroit store closed in 1939 due to effects of the Great Depression, the Royal Oak location was still able to turn a profit and remained in operation. The store continued to be a success and served to provide furniture for many Royal Oak households throughout the baby boom years as the city grew rapidly. Eventually the name was changed to Harper Furniture, which operated at the location until economic issues forced its closure in 2005. Owner Steve Goodman ran Harper Furniture for its last 18 years of operation, from 1987 through 2005. After its closure, the building stood vacant for eight years. But Goodman was not done with the property. In 2014, the building was converted to its current use — offices on the first floor (Beaumont Internal Medicine & Pediatrics) and living area on the second floor. The comprehensive renovation has given the building new life while still maintaining much of its 1924 character.



Then

Early 1940s. Photograph courtesy of the Royal Oak Historical Society Museum

Now



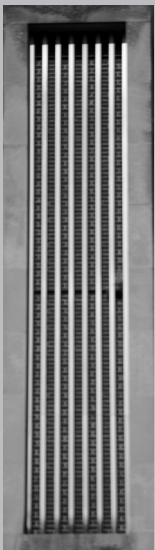
Photograph by John Maurice

PHOTO GAME

This issue's Photo Game takes us out of downtown on Main Street between 11 Mile and Catalpa.

Answers on Page 7. Photographs by Bob Muller.

(a)



(b)



(c)



Looking Back: Royal Oak in 1960

COLLECTED BY JOHN S. SCHULTZ FROM THE PAGES OF THE DAILY TRIBUNE

The Lassiter Murder Trial Revisited 60 Years Later

By Jane Simon Ammeson

When the Michigan State Police went to arrest Nelle Lassiter for the murder of her husband, the owner of a successful used-car business in Royal Oak, she was easy to find. The stylish platinum blonde, dressed in her typical attire — a form fitting suit, hair coiled in a French twist, high heels accentuating shapely legs and hands sheathed in brown leather gloves — was in Judge Joseph Rashid's court chamber, waiting to testify against the three men accused of killing the man they worked for — Parvin "Bill" Lassiter.

About the same time but 2,200 miles away, police in L.A. slapped cuffs on Gordon Watson, Bill's dapper business partner. He too was charged with his murder.

Greed and sex, one reporter mused, were great motives for murder. And for readership too. The murder trial of Nelle Lassiter and Gordon Watson was one of the top 10 stories in Michigan 60 years ago.

A poor kid who never made it past eighth grade, Bill Lassiter was good at buying low and selling high when it came to used cars. His job required frequent travel but when he was gone, Gordon "took care of business" both at the Volkswagen dealership and with Bill's wife Nelle, a former lingerie model.

Lassiter was robbed, beaten, and shot in the back in a wooded section not far from the Willow Run Airport on April 6, 1959, upon returning from a trip out west; his partially covered body found in a drainage ditch two days later. The \$8,000 to \$10,000 he typically carried and a money belt were both gone.

Eleven state police detectives were assigned to the case and within two days had arrested, though later released, two men, Roy Hicks and Charles Nash, thought to have been involved in the murder. By the middle of May, prosecutors had enough evidence to arrest those two plus one other, Richard Jones, an ex-con who had spent nine years of a 30-year prison term for murder.

Nelle, when she thought she was helping the state police gather evidence to convict the accused men, told police she and Gordon had been having an affair for the last two years and that Gordon had known about Bill's murder shortly after it happened.

But the state police weren't done with their investigation.

"From the very beginning, we thought they were involved," State Police Detective Lieutenant Howard Whaley told *The Daily Tribune* after Nelle and Gordon were arrested. Indeed, Watson had taken three lie detector tests just a few days after Lassiter's body was discovered. All were inconclusive.

Nelle, her friends testified, was a dedicated housewife who loved to sew and cook dinners for her family. Reporters, digging up dirt, discovered a marriage slightly more nuanced.

Charge Widow Plotted Car Dealer's Murder

The widow of slain automobile dealer Parvin Lassiter and his former business partner, Gordon Watson, today are charged with first degree murder.

Mrs. Nelle Lassiter, age 38, was dramatically arrested after she appeared to testify in the Circuit court trial of three men charged with the actual slaying.

Wayne Prosecutor Sam Olsen said Watson's arrest had been ordered. He is reported to be in the Los Angeles area.

Three state police detectives questioned Mrs. Lassiter behind closed doors in a small room near the court chambers where she was taken after being arrested in Judge Rashid's chambers.

She could be heard crying and sobbing loudly within the room. Mrs. Lassiter was heard to sob "I loved my husband and I still do."

A crowd, meanwhile, milled outside the court room completely oblivious to the drama that was going on only a few feet away.

In spite of the developments, Assistant Prosecutor George D. Kent said he would continue with plans to call Mrs. Lassiter to the

der is understood to be willing to testify as to the roles of Mrs. Lassiter and Watson in the case.

Nash is the alleged trigger man who fired shots into the back of the Royal Oak Volkswagen dealer in a wooded section not far from Willow Run airport.

Lt. Howard Whaley of State Police left for Los Angeles this morning to pick up Watson. Wat-

NELLE LASSITER

Newspaper clipping courtesy of The Daily Tribune

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Looking Back: Lassiter Murder • Continued from Page 6

Bill and Nelle's troubles had started long before Gordon came along. The two had filed for divorce after moving to metro Detroit. She claimed he was abusive and jealous; he said she had other men. They got back together, but while Bill was shipping out for World War II, Nelle was heading to their hometown of Murray, Kentucky, along with their two-year-old daughter. She wanted Bill's parents to take the kid. But the Lassiters, conservative country folk, had never liked make-up wearing, cigarette-smoking Nelle. And they certainly didn't approve of her going to New York and leaving their granddaughter with them.

They'd raised nine of their own, Bill's mother recalled saying to her daughter-in-law years later when a reporter from *The Detroit News* showed up at her door. But Nelle finessed them.

"I'll put her in an institution then," she said. So the girl stayed, and Nelle left. After Bill, who was shot three times in a battle, spent a long convalescence at the VA hospital in Nashville, he moved back to Murray to finish recuperating. His daughter was still there too. As for Nelle, well, she was in New York modeling lingerie and hanging out with artist types. She didn't return to Detroit until Bill moved back and started making the kind of money that got her a \$50,000 nine-room ranch in Beverly Hills filled with French Provincial furniture, turquoise accents and pink bathtubs, a swimming pool out back, a full length mink (her color choice was Autumn Haze) once a year and a new Cadillac every six months.

A woman, who had learned to expect the best, hired the best attorney, one who had represented Detroit mob figures. It was a smart move because any jail time, even the brief transition to the bare sixth floor cellblock at the Wayne County Jail, was difficult indeed. The cotton mattress was uncomfortable; so was the jail garb she was given to wear, and she really couldn't do without her make-up.

With evidence piled up against the grieving widow, her daughter, a Liz Taylor look-alike now 18, was called to testify that her mother had known Bill was dead before his body was discovered. Nash and Hicks claimed the two lovers had offered them a car and a large amount of cash to get rid of Bill. Nelle, always cool, suddenly went hysterical and then catatonic. Two of the three doctors who examined her said she was unfit to continue with the trial. Interestingly, the one disagreeing was her own family doctor. The judge, who had postponed the trial five times already, declared a mistrial. Nelle was transported to the Ionia State Hospital to recover.

Back in court in the spring of 1960, it didn't look good for the defense. Her story was that, sure, she had an affair with Gordon at first willingly but then he threatened that he'd reveal Bill's somewhat shady business dealings unless she continued to sleep with him. She denied saying "Darling, we'll finally be together" to Gordon in front of the men they were paying to kill Bill.

It all looked bad, but then it wasn't. Nelle's case was dismissed, and she walked out of court both free and the primary heir to Bill's estate. The total, besides that French Provincial furniture, the Cadillacs, the car dealership, home and mink coats, also included \$130,000 in cash, (approximately \$1.56 million today) plus Bill's life insurance payout worth around \$267,000.

Today, Bill's gravestone in Murray bears his name and the dates of his birth and death. Nelle's name is written next to his along with her birthdate. But the date of her death is still blank. She's not buried there. Bill lies alone.

Thousands of news articles ended when she walked out of the courtroom. It seems as if someone opened a door, and she walked through, shutting it behind her. Sleuthing indicates she tinkered with her name, remarried and died in the early 1990s. Her daughter is still alive. Gordon returned to his forgiving wife, also named Nell. Whether that lasted, who knows? Relatives still live in metro Detroit and around Murray, and though Nash, Hicks and Jones confessed, who, if anyone, paid them to murder Bill Lassiter remains a mystery.

Jane Simon Ammerson is a freelance writer, author, and photographer. She has written several books, including "Murders that Made Headlines."

PHOTO GAME ANSWERS:
(a) Genesis Church
(b) 423 North Main Street
(c) Main Art Theater



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Century: \$100____ Club: \$200____ Premium: \$300____ Benefactor: \$500____

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