



volume 14 / number 6

August 2023

Message from the President . . .

Happy August!

We are certainly getting deeper into summer; the wildflowers are at their peak lining the roads and marsh with their glorious show of white, purple, and yellow. Although there can be hints of fall in a cool breeze, August is one of my favorite months with all the wildflowers (and warmer water to swim comfortably!!). We continue to welcome great visitors to the museum, and our hosts are doing a great job of welcoming visitors.

We still have plenty of summer left at the museum with our annual meeting on August 12th, the speaker on August 20th, and the Labor Day weekend festivities in Sans Souci. We look forward to seeing our members at one or all the upcoming events for some fun and knowledge . . . and of course a little camaraderie.

The annual meeting will be at 9:30 AM on August 12th at the museum. As always, all members are welcome and encouraged to attend. Since we are meeting in the morning, a few breakfast type snacks and food will be available for everyone's enjoyment.

As always, thank you for your support!

Joyce

Joyce Hassen, President

Save the Date – August 20 at 2:00 pm

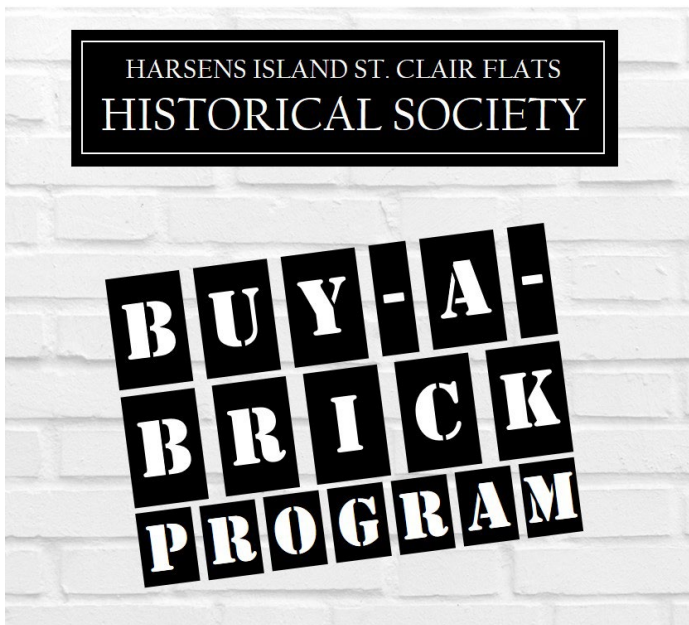
Author LeRoy A. Rubinas Shares History of the Steamship J. B. Ford

Join us to hear LeRoy A. Rubinas discuss his observations over the years of the Steamship J. B. Ford. Mr. Rubinas has a couple books out on the vessel and will be joined by well-known marine historian and author Wes Oleszewski who will talk about his tour of the vessel in 2001. Mr. Rubinas has had a website about the J. B. Ford since 2006 www.steamshipjbfordhistoricalsurvey.org. Mr. Rubinas studied & photographed the ship from 1991 after his first tour with the Chicago Maritime Society, until 1993 when he left Chicago to study engineering at Great Lakes Maritime Academy. Since those early years he has toured the vessel various times and watched it change over time. This is a chance to meet and greet the authors and learn what they know from touring this once proud ship.

Harsens Island St. Clair Flats Historical Society Building Renovation BUY-A-BRICK Program

The past three years we celebrated the completion of several renovation projects; in 2020 the Clayton Evans Room Addition, in 2021 the Karen and Drew Peslar Library and in 2022 the large exhibit space at the entrance to the museum named the Nancy Boulton / Gary Grout Room.

To help maintain the museum's infrastructure and a healthy financial position for our Historical Society, we are reactivating our BUY-A-BRICK Program.



Members and friends can support the Historical Society and assure the continuance of the museum by donating \$350 to our BUY-A-BRICK program. Donors will be recognized or may designate a memorial on one of the bricks inside the museum. Of course, they may remain anonymous if they wish. Donations of any amount to support the renovation efforts are welcome and appreciated. To sign up, or if you have questions, contact Bob Williams at 248-388-0465 or xharpspah@aol.com.

BUY-A-BRICK Order Form is included at the end of this newsletter.

How Electricity Came to Harsens Island and the St. Clair Flats

Sourced from Delta News 1962

Utilities come to Harsens Island! Electricity, water, sewage, gas, phone, tv cable, and trash pickup did not happen all at once and some services are still a work in progress. I thought it would be fun to walk down memory lane about how some of the different utilities and services came to be on Harsens Island and the St. Clair Flats.

It was 100 years ago that electricity came to Harsens Island. This is an article that was published in the Delta News in 1962.

In mid-winter 1923 Detroit Edison and a group of local residents, headed by David Osgood, joined forces in the challenging task of bringing electric service to the St. Clair Flats.

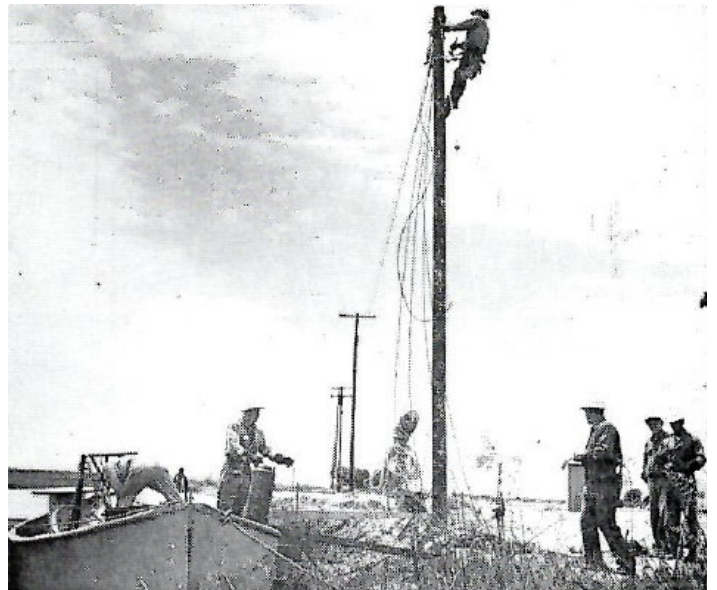
As reported by the late William Rilea, who was then a foreman for Edison's overhead lines department, the biggest problem was that of transporting construction materials from the mainland, across the half-mile wide North Channel to Harsens Island – the base of operations.

After careful studies were made, it was decided to haul the materials across the ice during the month of February instead of waiting for spring when a ferry could be used.

When the project got under way, the river was covered with ice about 14 inches thick, Mr. Rilea reported. However, the eight-mile-per-hour current in the channel made the members of the task force a little uneasy as they started their first trek across the ice.

Assembled on the mainland shore were 750 poles, 30 tons of wire, 50 transformers, 2,000 crossarms and several hundred pounds of miscellaneous hardware.

Mr. Rilea wrote, "The transportation of the material across the river (Probably by horse-drawn bobsled) was put into the capable hands of Sam Gore, a local gentleman with long experience on the river in every season. He assured the doubting Edison Engineers that the ice was as safe as dry land and would remain so for a time plenty enough to get everything over. He was right and the goods were delivered to Harsens Island without loss of a single lag bolt."



Continued on page 4 . . .

Continued from page 3 . . . How Electricity Came to Harsens Island

Mr. Gore's success with the construction materials gave the task force enough courage to move a nine-ton digging machine across the ice. To accomplish this task, the machine was moved onto two 60-foot skids, providing an improvised sled which was dragged across the ice by three teams of horses. As soon as the rig was on solid ground it was put to work and in a period of five days it had set all the poles on Russell and Harsens Islands – about one-half of that first major project.

Mr. Rilea's report tells us that while the digging machine was busy setting poles in the frozen earth, Detroit Edison crews were busy laying a 2,000-foot-long underwater cable across the channel.

To pull the 3 1/2-inch diameter cable across the ice, the men used the winch on dredge which had been laid up for the winter at a spot near where the cable was to come ashore. A rope was carried across the ice, wrapped on the winch, and the other end made fast to the end of the cable. When the first reel had been drawn out, 1,500 feet of cable lay on the ice, one end firmly anchored on the Harsens Island side. A second section of cable was pulled out to meet the end of the first one.

"The splicing of the two cables was an affair of such importance to the residents of the Island." Mr. Rilea said, "that the school children were given a holiday from the 'three R's' so that they could witness the event." The joined cables, laying on the ice, were a visible bond between the Island and the mainland. A trench about 18 inches was cut in the ice paralleling the cable across the channel and the cable was unceremoniously pushed into it. Mr. Rilea noted that sufficient slack had been left at the ends of the cable so that it could drop to the bottom of the channel which in some places is 90 feet deep.

In concluding his report, he paid tribute to all the islanders and the Edison men who worked through severe February blizzards – setting poles, cutting ice, laying cable, and stringing wire. He also added a few words of commendation for Mrs. Wood's Boarding House where the line crews were fed many "delicious and bountiful" meals.

Edison linemen breathed a sigh of relief when the nine-ton digger returned to the mainland without incident. The remainder of the task of extending lines south from Harsens Island to the Old Club, a distance of 13 miles, was taken over by a contractor from Algonac, a Captain Furtow.

In the 1932, lines were extended down Middle Channel Drive and in 1949 lines to the Old Club were relocated along Green Highway. The year 1955 brought electric service, by means of underwater cables, to Dickerson, McDonald and North Islands, and the following year Green Island was included as part of the Edison services area. The North Island line was continued on to Baltimore Highway in 1958 and the Middle Channel line was extended to Clinton River Boat Club in 1959.

Not long after the first powerline from Algonac Substation to the Flats was put into service in 1923, the late Tom Gibson, Sr., became Detroit Edison's water-borne customer service representative on the islands. It was estimated that there were about 200 electric customers at that time, most of them living on farms. By 1950 there were 934 customers – 26 farm customers and 861 residential. Mr. Gibson, who first came to Harsens Island with his parents in 1903, served as "Mr. Detroit Edison" on the islands until his death in 1955.

DID YOU KNOW??

That in 1934 The Harsens Island Fire Department consisted of one Ford truck, one Barton F.B. pump, 500 feet of hose and an electric siren mounted on the fire hall.

That the following procedure was used:
Phone 9324, Krispin's store, tell them where the fire is!

Two blasts of siren — LaCroix Road to Clay's

Three blasts — LaCroix Road to Grand Pointe

Four blasts — Grand Pointe to Gore's Corner

Five blasts — Gore's Corner to the Bay
In case of fire — do your share they may need your help!

THE NEW "SOUTH CHANNEL"



Joyce Bryson Christens the "South Channel"

After much thought as to the present and future needs of Harsens Island and the St. Clair Flats for ferry service and the best design of a boat to meet these needs, Arthur Champion reached the conclusion a new ferry should be built. Who would know better? He is on duty almost 24 hours a day and the ferry is his life's work. He brushed aside the substantial investment involved and the fact it would take a long time to recover the cost. He believes in the island and its people, and that is his answer to any question.

On June 1, 1972, the ferry company took the first step toward construction of the new boat by signing a contract with the Blount Marine Corporation of Warren Rhode Island, an old and highly regarded ship building company with a New England tradition. A tentative delivery date, November, could not be met.

Delays ensued hurricane Lyndia swept the east coast with damage to Blounts ship yard along with substantial damage to commercial enterprises and others located in its path.

A restaurant ship and a large five deck hospital ship, for use in New York Harbor as a clinic were behind schedule but listed for delivery ahead of ours, had problems and we were further delayed.

A letter from Blount announced a December start on the new boat, things were under way, except for usual construction problems.

The big day for launching arrived. Long tradition attaches considerable importance to his event. With her proud parents looking on, Joyce Bryson broke the tradi-

The New "South Channel"

Sourced from Delta News 1973

Fifty years ago, the ferry "South Channel" ferry was christened.

tional bottle of champagne and spoke the words "I Christen Thee "South Channel." Then on this March 20, 1973, with its hull glistening with fresh paint and decorated with flags including the Michigan flag, a gift from the Harsens Island police, the ninety-four ton, seventy-nine feet long and thirty-two feet wide, on the push of a button pressed in the control tower, was slowly lowered into the water and afloat. Not nearly as dramatic as the old way, when a boat slid down a way, with a big splash, righting itself in the water with the cradle popping up. The clergyman spoke the words associated by long custom with the launching and blessing of boats. The ceremony was complete, but the boat required some final work and all this took place at Warren Rhode Island, a long way away from Harsens Island.

On Saturday, April 21, after the Blount pilot turned over the wheel, Arthur Champion and his three grandsons, David, Robert, and John Arthur Bryson accompanied by Frank Romer from General Motors Tech Center and his son Glen, took the boat all the way to Harsens Island. Down the bay from Warren, up Long Island Sound, through the Harlem River, up the Hudson, through the New York Barge Cannal (Erie Cannal), across Lake Erie, up the Detroit River, Lake St. Clair, and the St. Clair river to the ferry landing. What a glorious trip with a safe arrival.

Art said he wanted to build another boat and bring it home just once more. And he did. All his friends welcomed him home.

Harsens Island Historical Society Calendar 2023

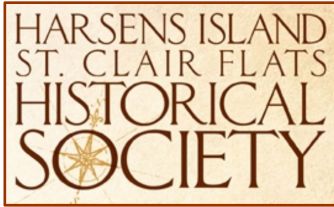
PLEASE NOTE: All events and locations in the following schedule are tentative.

| Date | Day | Time | Event |
|-----------------|----------|--------------------|---|
| August 12 | Saturday | 9:30 AM | Board Meeting at Museum |
| August 12 | Saturday | 10:00 AM | Annual Membership Meeting at the Museum |
| August 20 | Sunday | 2:00 PM | Author LeRoy A. Rubinas talks about J.B. Ford |
| September 2 - 4 | Saturday | 10:00 AM – 3:00 PM | Museum Hours |
| | Saturday | 11:00 AM | Labor Day Parade |
| | Sunday | 12:00 PM – 4:00 PM | Museum Hours |
| | Monday | 11:00 AM – 2:00 PM | Museum Hours |
| September 9 | Saturday | 9:30 AM | Board Meeting at the Museum |
| October 7 | Saturday | 10:00 AM – 1:00 PM | Annual Pie Sale |
| October 14 | Saturday | 9:30 AM | Board Meeting at the Museum |
| November 12 | Sunday | 3:00 PM | Remembrance Edmund Fitzgerald |
| November 11 | Saturday | 9:30 AM | Board Planning Meeting via Zoom |
| December 2 | Saturday | 10:00 AM – 1:00 PM | Cookie Walk |
| December 9 | Saturday | 9:30 AM | Board Meeting via Zoom |



Museum Hours

| Summer Schedule (June, July, August, September) |
|--|
| Saturdays 10:00 AM – 3:00 PM |
| Sundays 12:00 PM – 4:00 PM |
| Winter Schedule (October through April) |
| Closed but Open by appointment |



A publication of the Harsens Island St.
Clair Flats Historical Society

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www.harsensislandhistory.org

HISCFHS Board of Directors 2023

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The historical society is looking to add to its collection. We accept donations of artifacts, photos, documents, and stories related to the Island and surrounding area. If you would like to add your family history to the museum archives, we can help you capture your memories for future generations.

Please contact our curator; Chris Knight at
chris.knight@comcast.net

Is your house more than 100 years old?

The Michigan Heritage Home™ program recognizes houses that were constructed at least 100 years ago and are in substantially original condition. That designation comes with a handsome cast-aluminum plaque that lets everyone know that your home has its own rich heritage and historical significance. This distinguished plaque, authorized by the Historical Society of Michigan, will remind both new and longtime community members of your home's contribution to your shared heritage.



For more information [click here](#) to go to the

[Michigan Heritage Program](#)

<https://www.hsmichigan.org/awards/michigan-heritage-home>

Harsens Island St. Clair Flats Historical Society Building Renovation BUY-A-BRICK Order Form

I / We would like to 'BUY-A-BRICK' to support the Museum.

Indicate on the three lines below the inscription you would like on the brick using up to 25 letters, spaces, or special characters per line.

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Print Your Name _____

Your Phone Number _____ - _____ - _____

Your email address _____ @ _____

_____ **Enclosed is my check for \$350 made payable to HISCFHS.**

_____ **I will not be purchasing a brick at this time but have enclosed a donation for the renovation.**

Payments should be made payable to "HISCFHS" with "BRICK" on the memo line and mailed to the HISCFHS at P.O. Box 44, Harsens Island, MI 48028.