



# ROYAL OAK *Historical Society*

OCTOBER 2023 • ROYALOAKHISTORICALSOCIETY.COM

## Turning Pages of History at Royal Oak Library

By Ellen Kehoe

**OUR ROYAL OAK COMMUNITY** has maintained and enjoyed the benefits of a library even in its earliest days as a township and village more than 170 years ago. The existing building we know and appreciate on Eleven Mile is considered the eighth library location in Royal Oak — if one starts around 1852 with “the reading room” described by a young local man, Flemon Drake, in about 1920 in *Royal Oak Twigs and Acorns: A History* by David G. Penney and Lois A. Lance.

“Dr. Brewster furnished a room in his home and some books. Others brought in books. The doctor’s daughter, Violet Brewster, took charge of the books and the room. All was voluntary. No charge, no fines,” Drake said.

The current Royal Oak Public Library — funded by a 1961 bond issue as the first building designed for use exclusively as a library — opened 60 years ago on April 20, 1963. The anniversary of its dedication was celebrated earlier this year with a 1960s-themed dance party for kids, card catalog scavenger hunt, displays of memorabilia and midcentury snacks.

**AT MOVING TIME IN 1963**, nearly half of the library’s 90,000-volume collection was circulating from the former location at the southwest corner of Third and Main (where Starbucks is today); book returns to the new building created havoc before the April dedication open house, according to the library director at the time, Mrs. Carrie S. Palmer. Several readers of this newsletter no doubt recall visiting the current library and its predecessor at Third and Main (1936-1963) during their school days — to flip through the card catalog and check out books for homework assignments, as well as to socialize with friends.

Leading up to the opening of the new library in 1963 there was a series of locations beginning with a township library in 1856, housed in the township clerk’s home. Recollections printed in *The Daily Tribune* in February 1937 quoted pioneer resident Ralzemond A. Parker from 1924 saying the library had mostly “biography and books of a scientific nature. There was little or no fiction. At that time there were no fines or charges of any kind either.” When the town hall was built, the library moved there and was open to the public on Saturday afternoons, “to accommodate the farmers who came in [to town] to shop,” notes *Twigs and Acorns*. Few books could be purchased each year, but nonetheless “the library grew and was well patronized.”

In 1916, superintendent of schools Frank Hendry addressed the need for a public library with members of the Royal Oak Woman’s Club. Two club members from well-known Royal Oak

*Continued on Page 4*



Photographs from Royal Oak Public Library collection

**South entrance of the Royal Oak Public Library, 1960s**

### HISTORICAL SOCIETY ANNUAL DINNER

Tuesday, October 10  
6 p.m. at First United  
Methodist Church  
Tickets \$40 on ROHS website.



*Happy Retirement*

**BEST WISHES TO CURATOR  
MURIEL VERSAGI**

See article on Page 6.

ROYAL OAK  
*Historical Society*

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and by appointment

UPCOMING EXHIBITS

See Page 7

Southeastern Oakland Art Association  
Show and Sale

September 30 – October 14

History of Royal Oak Fire Department

October 17 – 28

All photographs courtesy of the Royal Oak  
Historical Society unless otherwise noted.

# President's Message

BY BOB MULLER

**THE ROYAL OAK HISTORICAL SOCIETY** has been an active organization in our community since 1939. For most of those years the tradition of an annual fundraising dinner drew hundreds of attendees eager to renew ties with friends and embrace the long history of our city and support the society.

Attendance in the late 1960s and early 1970s often topped 500 people, and for many years the annual dinner was held at St. John's Episcopal Church. It was there that Swiss steak, mashed potatoes and gravy and fruit pies for dessert were the perennially requested menu items. Our newsletter designer Ellen Kehoe, who attended that church, recalls her mom telling her that cleanup of the church's kitchen stoves was quite a job due to the grease from browning the Swiss steak. Additionally, the insider joke for the event by church helpers was that it was called the "Hysterical Dinner."

More recently, less hysterical numbers were accommodated at such venues as Pasquale's on Woodward and Farina's in Berkley. The Covid pandemic interrupted the annual tradition in 2020 and 2021, but last fall the dinner and camaraderie were greatly enjoyed once again.

This year's Annual Historical Dinner will be held on Tuesday, October 10, at the First United Methodist Church in downtown Royal Oak beginning at 6 p.m. for a social hour, followed by dinner, awards and trivia. The cost is \$40 and tickets are available on our website and at the museum.

**OUR BOARD MEMBERS** and I are asking historical society members and community residents to join us in honoring Muriel Versagi for her longtime volunteer service to the museum. Muriel announced her retirement in August. (See Page 6.) When the museum came to be in March 2004 — first at Churchill Continuing Education Center and then in January 2010 at its current location in the Northwood Fire Station, it was Muriel who became the curator along with her late husband Frank as the computer guru cataloging thousands of items. For nearly 20 years, Muriel has been the point person and worked almost full time directing and leading our volunteers to keep the doors open, develop displays, expand our collection and preserve our archives. We have grown in that time, and the museum is the main keeper of historic documents and items that tell the amazing story of Royal Oak.

**LONGTIME VOLUNTEER** Johanna Schurrer, who Muriel mentored, will take her place as curator. Johanna has been working with Muriel almost as long as the museum has been open. The magic that Muriel made happen at the museum will now be carried on by Johanna and others.

Thank you, Muriel, for all you have done and for your dedication to the Historical Society and the museum. Although you are no longer curator, we know we can turn to you for guidance as we move into our new future and build on the firm foundation and legacy that you created for Royal Oakers to enjoy. We hope you enjoy your retirement and the roses in your garden and know we will always have a chair for you at the table.

## *Royal Oak Historical Museum Speaker Series*

**Second Friday of each month • 7 p.m. at the museum  
\$10 per person • space limited to 35 attendees**

**Fri. October 13** — Significant Architecture of Royal Oak, by Dale A. Carlson

**Fri. November 10** — On the eve of Veterans Day, Judy Davids, community engagement specialist for the City of Royal Oak, will present the real-life stories of the names on Royal Oak's war memorials.

# Homes & Buildings in Royal Oak

EDITED BY JOHN S. SCHULTZ

In each newsletter, the Royal Oak Historical Society features stories on historic homes and buildings in our city. The selections come from the book *Royal Oak Images, Yesterday's Charm Today's Treasures* (Roundtable of Royal Oak Historical Organizations, 2006). A second edition of this book 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, coauthor of *Images of America: Royal Oak*, at [jsschultz11@gmail.com](mailto:jsschultz11@gmail.com).

The home on Knowles is a typical example of the Upright and Wing style so prevalent in Royal Oak and other Midwestern towns in the late 19th century. It was designated as a Historic District by the City of Royal Oak in April 2014.

**ANNA POSSESSED A VIVID MEMORY** of the times and events, people and places of Royal Oak Township, the early village of Royal Oak and later the city. She used this gift to inform others as a member of the Royal Oak Historical Society. In 1963 she became the Society's second woman president. Anna later served as the long-time secretary of the group.

Many Society meetings were held in her home on Knowles Street, with its front-porch view of the Royal Oak Farmers Market. She wrote the chapter entitled "Foot Paths That Widened" in the Golden Jubilee book *Royal Oak, Michigan, The Early Years*. When Anna's husband, George J., died in 1970, she donated memorabilia (including many turn-of-the-century items) to the Historical Society in his memory.

In 1997, the Sophie V. Bowman Award was given posthumously to Anna C. Hilzinger for her many contributions to the preservation of Royal Oak's history. Her son, William "Bill" Hilzinger, graciously accepted the award.

## Relocated Hilzinger House

211 Knowles Street

Upright and Wing Home, Relocated in 1945

**IN 1944-1945**, George J. Hilzinger with the assistance of his son, William, completed the move of this wood-framed house to Knowles Street from its original location on the south side of East Third Street between Williams and Troy streets, which was where the new *Daily Tribune* building would be built in a few years. On Knowles, this fine old home provided George and his wife Anna C. (Nielsen) Hilzinger and their family with a more comfortable house within walking distance of shopping and employment opportunities.

Anna C. Nielsen was a local girl who lived with her uncle, Peter Backer, in the former David Williams house on the west side of Rochester Road just north of Thirteen Mile Road. She married George J. Hilzinger in 1921 and they resided first at 126 Phillips Place before moving to this home.

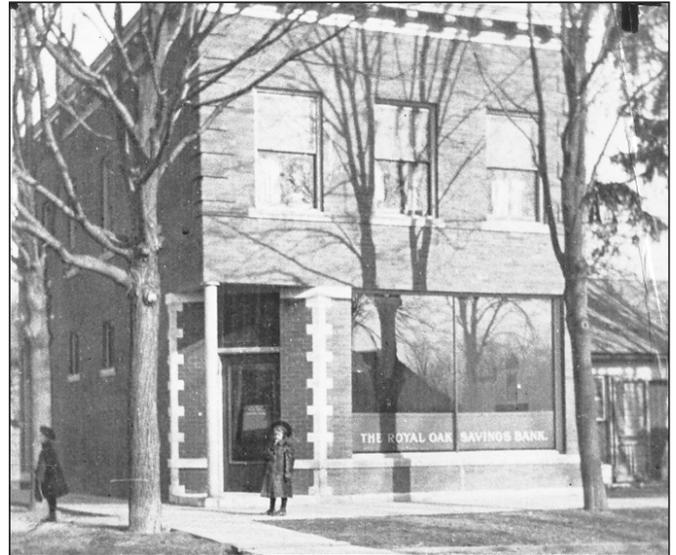


The home as it appeared in 1971 during the Golden Jubilee celebration of the City of Royal Oak.



founding families, Mrs. A.D. (Clara) Kidder and Mrs. Harry (Mabel) Gardner, enlisted the advice of the state library in developing public sentiment for a modern library. As a result, a 1/4-mill tax was approved by a township vote in April 1916. A board of three men and three women was appointed to oversee the library. Space was acquired on the second floor of the Savings Bank building at the northwest corner of Fourth and Main; all books were called in — and literally strewn on the floor prior to being organized and shelved. The 3,500 volumes in the collection were audited, with about 1,000 deemed in such worn condition that they needed to be discarded. Miss Elizabeth V. Briggs, a native of Romeo who formerly worked at the Detroit Public Library and studied at the New York Library School, was hired as the first trained librarian. She would serve as the head librarian until June 30, 1943. She died in 1959.

**ON FEBRUARY 10, 1917**, the library opened despite the onset of World War I. The *Twigs and Acorns* book explains: “People who had been accustomed to using the books had waited impatiently for the opening.” Formal opening festivities on April 18 were spoiled by “terrific downpour of rain ... just when friendly crowds were expected to gather.” The library was intended to be “a strong factor in the development of Royal Oak” and led activities related to the war to collect “books for soldiers and nut shells for gas masks, secure signatures for Hoover food pledges and assist in the registration of women [to vote].”



**The second floor of the Royal Oak Savings Bank building at Fourth and Main became the township library in 1917.**



**Elizabeth V. Briggs, 1940s**

A 1922 proposal for a “book wagon for adults” was dropped when the new city of Royal Oak took ownership of the township library later that year. The township retained reading rights for three years. In 1924 the library moved again — to a storefront in the Masonic Temple building at 418 S. Main (near where Noodles and Company and HopCat are located today). The ground floor space allowed easier access for patrons. From 1916 to 1925, the number of volumes had increased from 2,400 to 13,000 and circulation grew from 15,061 to 109,015. Miss Briggs now had four assistants, and a story hour for children was held every Saturday afternoon. A children’s librarian, Miss Laura B. Long, was hired.

In 1927, the library board leased space along Fourth Street and Lafayette Avenue in the soon-to-be-completed Washington Square Building. “It became possible to have a separate room for the children, more space for tables and shelving. In short, this new location provided twice as much floor space, better light for the children’s room, larger reference quarters and an improvement in general,” noted the *Tribune*. After moving 16,000 books, the library reopened on January 18, 1928, after being closed only four days. The children’s room was named for the Danish *Little Mermaid* author Hans Christian Andersen.

The *Tribune* reported that from June 1, 1929, to May 31, 1930, “a little more than a book a minute was circulated for every hour the library was open, and there was a per capita circulation of 9.7 books, based on the 1930 census. Nearly 40 percent of the population used the library, while a 30 percent average is considered good. Likewise, five books per capita is held to be an excellent record.” Of future benefit to local historians was an index of *The Daily Tribune* beginning on January 1, 1929.

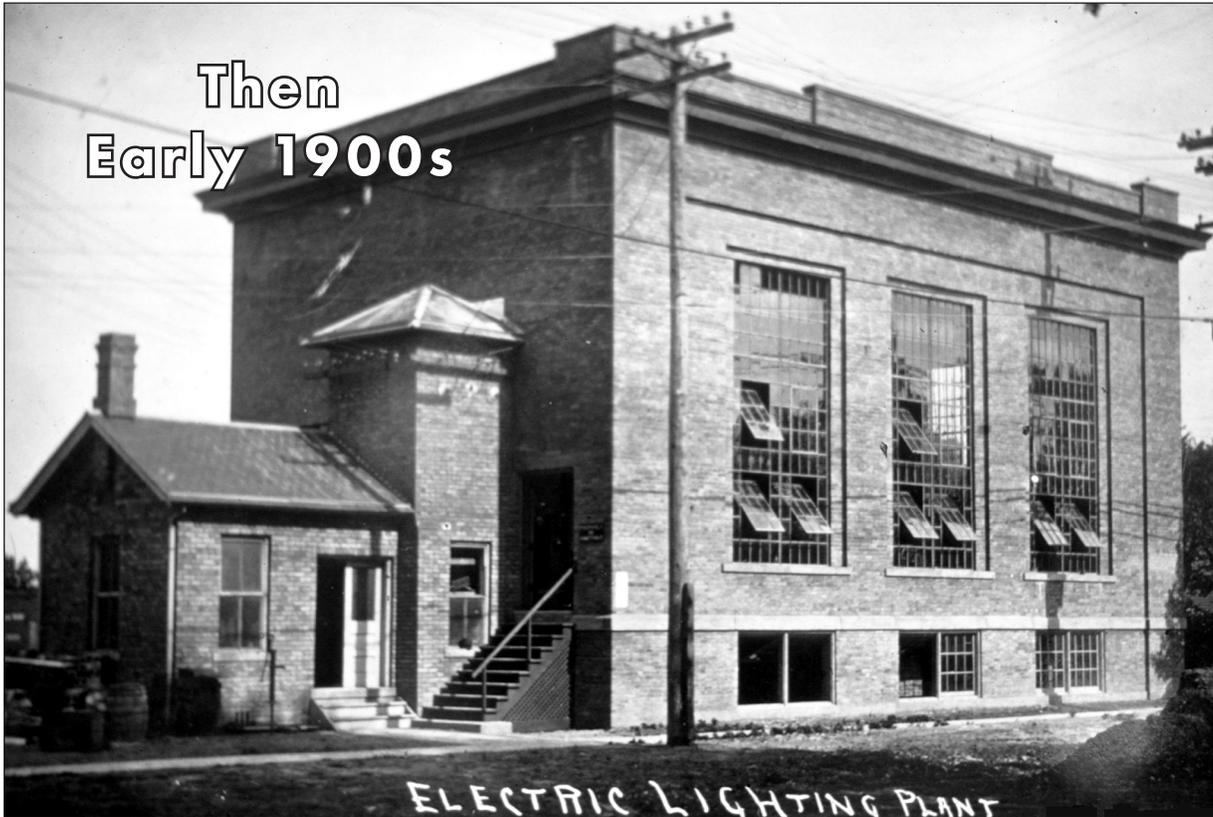
**IN 1935 THE LIBRARY BOARD** convinced the city to purchase the closed National Bank building at the southwest corner of South Main and Third. After renovations, the library opened there on March 27, 1936. Workers from the WPA (Works Progress Administration) assisted in mending and binding books to keep them in usable condition. Miss Mildred Limond headed the new reference department, and Mrs. Carrie Palmer began a movie program for children. Both women would later served as library directors. Building on the collection of Mr. LaVerne Brown — donated as he retired his long-time local music conservatory, the library’s small music assortment grew.

From the idea that the library should take the lead in collecting historical material, a group of nine women and one man organized the Royal Oak Historical Society in 1939, with a total of 70 charter members, according to *Royal Oak, Michigan, The Early Years* published in 1971 by Owen C. Perkins. The Friends of the Library group was also established.

**Continued on Page 8**

# Royal Oak Then & Now

BY JOHN MAURICE, ROHS FACEBOOK EDITOR



**THE BUILDING THAT SITS** at 711 South Main Street was built in 1906, and judging from the exterior it doesn't seem as if much has changed in the 117 years it has been standing. But to look at this structure and the changes it has undergone, you can just imagine the Royal Oak history hidden inside those walls.

The brick structure sits on the east side

of Main Street, just north of Lincoln Avenue. It was originally built as a coal-burning power plant by the company then known as St. Clair Edison, which provided power for the streetcars that used to travel along the Woodward corridor in Oakland County from Eight Mile Road all the way up to Pontiac.

**BEGINNING IN THE 1940s**, after the streetcars stopped running and the electricity to power them was no longer needed, the building housed Billings Feed Store. At the time, it was said that Billings sold everything from chicken scratch to dog food to hay for horses. Billings occupied that location for nearly 60 years before moving north on Main Street in 2000 and leaving the building vacant once again. The Johnson family, who owned Billings for many years, sold the property in 2006 to the current owners, who brought everything full circle by naming their corporation "St. Clair Edison LLC." Upon acquisition, they performed extensive renovations that restored the distinctive brickwork and replaced the glass block windows with new ones to mimic the originals from so many years ago.

Prior to 2007, the building had never even had running water or a sewer system. Current occupants of the building are Bigalora Wood Fired Cucina and Cloverleaf Fine Wine. When you are downtown, take a look at this building — when the setting sun hits the brickwork just right, the building absolutely radiates in a warm glow, as you can see in the **Now** photo. We can be thankful that this piece of Royal Oak history has been preserved and improved for the next generation.



# Longtime Museum Curator Muriel Versagi Retires

By Trish Oliver



Photograph courtesy of Les Ward

*Muriel Versagi at the museum at Churchill Continuing Education Center around 2006.*

**MURIEL VERSAGI**, the longtime and first-ever curator of the museum for the Royal Oak Historical Society and a crusader for preserving the city's history, has retired from her position after nearly 20 years with the organization.

At age 89, Muriel stepped down in August due to persistent vertigo. She also says she wants to take more time to savor her beautiful rose garden at her home in Royal Oak and spend more time with her friends and family.

Muriel's long tenure as curator from 2004 to 2023 made her the go-to person for volunteers and museum visitors to get their questions answered. Recently retired General Motors designer and long-time ROHS volunteer Joanna Becker says that Muriel had been curator such a long time that she knew everyone connected with the museum, past and present, and knew all of the artifacts. She had such a wealth of knowledge that volunteers didn't have to look anything up — they could just ask Muriel. "She was the perfect face of the museum," Joanna says. "She is so positive, outgoing and friendly."

Muriel's successor curator Johanna Schurrer says that Muriel mentored her during their 18 years working together, and because of that, she felt confident to take on the leadership role when Muriel decided it was time to retire. "Muriel and I didn't always agree on things — our opinions differed over the years, but I respected that she had the final word," Johanna says. "I will miss those wily discussions — we were loud at times, but we always left the museum laughing."

Muriel called her volunteers her "Museum Angels." When something serendipitous happened at the museum, she would often say, referring to the spiritual kind, "That's my angels — I have angels everywhere." As Muriel will turn 90 next April 3, her volunteer angels look forward to continuing to draw on her knowledge to shape the museum's future in the days ahead.

**THE MUSEUM CAME TO BE** in March 2004 when five women — Agnes Buhalski, Pat Eaves, Bonnie Linehan, Blanche Meyerhoven Roth and Muriel Versagi — each contributed \$1,000 to purchase the collection of Bill Rasmussen, a former city police officer and local history buff. The museum was based at Churchill Continuing Education Center for six years, including the three years needed to ready the decommissioned Northwood fire station for use as the new museum. The fire station was acquired from the city of Royal Oak for a one dollar a year lease. The grand opening gala took place on April 30, 2010.

Muriel believes the museum is important to Royal Oak because it pulls together a lot of great stories, people and events. "If you don't know your history," she says, "you're doomed to repeat it," echoing a familiar saying. She especially loves the library room at the museum because of the Lincoln memorabilia and also appreciates the three-ring binders that contain stories written by local residents about living in Royal Oak.

Muriel's daughter Lynda Sirko says her mother always refers to the Royal Oak Historical Society Museum as "her museum." "She talks about it literally every place she goes," Lynda says. "Even if she's just had a tooth pulled, she'll pop up afterward and ask the dentist, 'Have you been to my museum yet?'"

Muriel attracted and cultivated a highly credentialed group of volunteers at the museum. Susan Wolfrum, museum science major and former volunteer from 2004 to 2019, says it was always a pleasure working with Muriel. Since Susan most enjoyed researching the exhibits and laying them out, she helped Muriel formulate how a museum should look as it first got on its feet.

*Continued on Page 7*



Royal Oak Historical Society photograph

*Muriel and her late husband Frank celebrate the grand opening of the Royal Oak Historical Museum on April 30, 2010.*

## Upcoming Exhibits

### Southeastern Oakland Art Association Show and Sale • September 30 – October 14

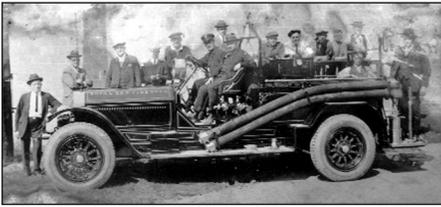
More than a dozen artists from the Southeastern Oakland Art Association (SOAA) will display their artwork at the Royal Oak Historical Museum with a grand opening celebration from 2-5 p.m. Sunday, October 1.

Everyone is invited to join SOAA members for an afternoon of art and refreshments. It's a free event, however donations are accepted and encouraged to support the museum. Many art pieces will be for sale. Cash, checks and credit cards are accepted.

The show will be open to the public from 1-4 p.m. during regular museum hours on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from September 30 to October 14. New this year: the museum will be staffed by artists for extended hours from 11 a.m.–4 p.m. Saturday, October 7.



### History of Royal Oak Fire Department • October 17 – 28



The historic fire station home of the Royal Oak Historical Museum is the perfect venue for an exhibit on the history of the Royal Oak Fire Department. Two special events are planned at the museum: a **chili cookoff** with several former firefighters from 10 a.m.–3 p.m. on Saturday, October 21; and a demonstration by the fire department from 10 a.m.–3 p.m. on Saturday, October 28, of **residential fire modeling**, an advanced technology used to simulate the way a fire behaves, predict the impact of a fire and aid the design of effective safety measures.

Ad Game answers: (a) 1953, (b) 1923, (c) 1953, (d) 1953, (e) 1933, (f) 1923, (g) 1963 Don't peek! See game on Page 14.

## Retirement • Continued from Page 6



Photograph courtesy of Lynda Sirko

### Muriel in her tea party hat at the museum.

Muriel's favorite exhibit, according to her daughter Lynda, is the Christmas exhibit in which trees are decorated in the style of different long-ago eras. Indeed, one of Muriel's favorite sayings is "Every day at the museum is Christmas" as she delighted in the artifacts donated and reminiscences shared by visitors. When asked what was her mother's favorite thing about being curator, Lynda quipped, "Being the boss!" and elaborated that Muriel liked being in charge. She loved showing visitors around the museum.

Muriel dreamed of putting a tea room on the roof of the former Northwood firehouse that houses the museum so that Royal Oak's school alumni could have a cup of tea while browsing through old yearbooks. Her 2002–2004 tenure as president of the Royal Oak Woman's Club may have inspired this wish, as the Woman's Club has had a Christmas tea for several years. That wish didn't come to fruition, but it illustrated Muriel's desire to make guests comfortable at the museum.

other displaced iron and copper mine workers came south looking for work after the mines shut down. Her father jacked up their first home in Warren on concrete blocks and dug a basement — a feat that came easily, perhaps, to someone not intimidated by digging in the earth. Of Finnish and Swedish extraction, Muriel is well known for her red hair.

Muriel is the older sister to Laretta Anderson Galerneau, Tina Anderson Nellis and the late Bill Anderson who she said was "her buddy." When asked if her siblings were also interested in history, Muriel said, "No, I'm the only crazy one!" She is enjoying more time in her rose garden and seeing friends and her family, which includes daughter Lynda Sirko, son Mick Iacobelli, three grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. Her oldest daughter Cheryl Iacobelli and her husband Frank Versagi of 47 years are deceased. Muriel said that her roses have been absolutely spectacular this year — she has more than 20 varieties of all colors including red, pink, white, orange and yellow.



Photograph courtesy of Lynda Sirko

**Muriel Dolores Anderson Versagi, around age 7, coming to Detroit to visit on the train from the Upper Peninsula, 1941**



Front of building on Main Street



Side of building on Third Street

The library location at Third and Main (now Starbucks) was the predecessor to the Eleven Mile building that opened in 1963.

In a 1941 year-end article in the *Tribune*, the library said the Friends group helped encouraged residents to "take a deep, personal pride in our institution and the service it offers."

In 1941, unused offices on the second floor were made into the children's department, relieving the "crowding together of students and people selecting books for home reading," according to *Twigs and Acorns*. These and other renovations were unveiled just one week before the December 7 attack on Pearl Harbor. The library again collected books for soldiers; more than 10,000 books were sorted and shipped overseas. *The Daily Tribune* Library Bookworm column on August 3, 1944, included thanks from a local soldier: "You have no idea how popular you and the Royal Oak Library are among the men of my outfit. To my knowledge you and your staff are the only ones who are doing such a fine thing."

**IN THE 1940S THE MUSIC RECORD LIBRARY** grew and was circulated on a rental basis. The memorial book program increased in appeal especially with donations following the death of Mrs. Clara Erb Kidder. A number of ceiling projectors for bedridden residents were made available. Later, bookmobiles and delivery services also helped the library reach homebound patrons. Children's services continued be a priority. The *Tribune* reported on November 8, 1944, that an experiment to change the Saturday story hour to a weekday afternoon was considered "because we feel that Saturday is a pretty full day for the average youngster. The time is 4 p.m., which gets the children home in ample time to wash up for dinner." Library statistics for 1946 were 10,579 registered borrowers and circulation up 15%. Head librarian Mildred Limond had 13 full-time assistants.

As early as 1946, a new library facility was being considered as a component of a proposed civic center building (presumably the 1950 city hall). However, reservations raised by Miss Limond were apparently heeded, as she advocated for a separate facility rather than a wing of another structure. In the November 21, 1946, issue of *The Daily Tribune*, she cited national library planning recommendations in saying that "it is contrary to all principles of good library planning to first set up the building and then adapt the services to that building."



After a 1959 bond proposal was defeated, the library board regrouped with a new model for the building and timeline for financing. The *Tribune* reported that, in part, the board's consensus was that the previous design by renowned architect Minoru Yamasaki, although innovative and striking, was money better spent on "usable space in the building, not on its appearance." The new architect was Smith and Smith Associates of Royal Oak. On April 3, 1961, a 20-year bond issue for a new, dedicated \$800,000 library building was approved by Royal Oak voters. No longer was the library "pushed around from pillar to post, so to speak," said *Tribune* publisher Philip F. Miller in an editorial on April 2, 1963, as the new library was about to open.



Librarians have a little fun peeking from the stacks at the Third and Main building, which served the community from 1936 to 1963.

# Almon, Nancy and Clara Starr

By Don Drife



*Editor's Note: The Stories Behind the Gravestone series highlights people buried in one of Royal Oak's three cemeteries. We intend to collect these notes into a booklet for the bicentennial of the founding of Royal Oak Cemetery in 2026. If readers know of other information on the featured person, please send it to editor@royaloakhistoricalsociety.org.*

**THE ALMON STARR FAMILY'S** obelisk is in section "C" of Royal Oak Cemetery, close to the center drive of the cemetery. It is nine feet tall, made of pink granite and capped with a partially draped urn. Urns represent the barest elements of the mortal body as the soul ascends to Heaven. When

they are draped, it represents the shedding of earthly garments no longer needed. Just below the urn on one side of the monument is a five-pointed star.

Thirteen Starr family members, from three generations, are memorialized on four sides of the monument. On the west face are three names: Almon Starr, his wife Nancy Quick and their granddaughter Clara Ellen Starr.

Almon was the son of Orson Starr and Rhoda Gibbs. His parents moved to Royal Oak in 1831 and settled on the southwest corner of Main Street and 13 Mile Road. Almon was born in Richmond, New York, on September 9, 1828. He married Nancy Ann Quick in 1853. They had four children.

**AFTER WORKING AT** his father Orson's cowbell factory, Almon began a drain tile and brick works which opened in 1866 or 1868 near the southwest corner of Crooks Road and 13 Mile Road. He built a brick house on Crooks Road in 1868, just south of 13 Mile Road, which is still standing. In 1876, he attended the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia and saw Alexander Graham Bell demonstrate his telephone. When he returned home, he explained the function of the device to his son, Edwin, who built a working model. The first phone in the township ran across Crooks Road between Almon's and Edwin's homes. Almon died in 1895.

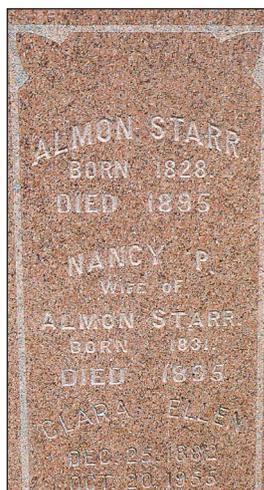
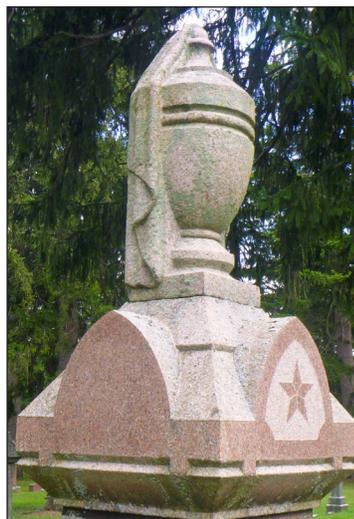
He is frequently called "John" Almon Starr. The historical marker on the property of the house, many websites and some local history books all use it. John Almon Starr was

his grandson. However, the late local historian Lois Lance researched

the name and could find no historical record of "John" being part of the name of the man who built the house. The error originated in an article published in the 1970s, and the error has been copied. Census records, Starr family Bibles, Starr descendants, his gravestone and other historic documents all have his name as simply Almon Starr. [Editor's Note: See Page 10 for more on Lois Lance's research of Almon Starr's name.]

**BORN IN ROYAL OAK IN 1831**, Nancy Quick was the daughter of Dennis Quick and Nancy Perrin. Both parents were members of prominent local pioneer families. She died in 1895 at the family home on Crooks Road.

Clara Ellen Starr was the daughter of Edwin A. Starr and Mary Salisbury and the granddaughter of Almon and Nancy. Born on Christmas Day 1882, she attended Royal Oak schools and graduated from Birmingham High School in 1900. After graduating from the University of Michigan, she taught in the Detroit Public Schools. Her work included establishing a music program at Northwestern High School and



Nancy Ann Quick Starr, wife of Almon Starr

Continued on Page 10

# Almon Starr: The Story Behind His First Name

By Lois Lance

Excerpt submitted by Don Drife from *Twigs and Acorns Plus*

[Editor's Note: Is it Almon Starr or John Almon Starr? In the last issue, we referred to "Almon Starr" as "John Almon Starr" in our Then and Now feature. Contributor Don Drife brought the following excerpt to our attention, written by the late Royal Oak historian Lois Lance in the 2008 edition of her and David Penney's book *Twigs and Acorns Plus*, P3-4 in the "Plus" part of this edition, published by Little Acorn Press. The book is available for sale at Frenz and Sons Hardware and at the museum.]

**WHAT WAS HIS NAME?** It now appears it wasn't John. It certainly wasn't "Almond"; that's a nut, a food you eat.

This is about Almon Starr, aka John Almon Starr. He came from Richmond, Ontario County, New York, with his parents (Orson and Rhoda) in 1831, when he was 3 years old. He died in Royal Oak in 1895. How did that "John" get in his name?

In the 1970s, another local historian was writing about Almon Starr, the brickmaker. Because Almon had a grandson by the name of John Almon Starr, who was still living at that time, the writer assumed the grandson was named for the grandfather and therefore called the grandfather John Almon Starr also.

In the 1980s, I researched the Almon Starr House at 3123 Crooks Road and copied the name as John Almon Starr from the article referred to above without thinking to verify it.

**LATER IN THE 1980s** and into the 1990s, I visited most of the elementary schools in Royal Oak dressed in vintage clothes and told the life story of Nancy Quick Starr and called her "Mrs. John Almon Starr." The children were fascinated to learn that she lived all her life in one square mile. They loved the old-fashioned clothes I let them try on and listened to a description of what school days were like before electricity and indoor plumbing.

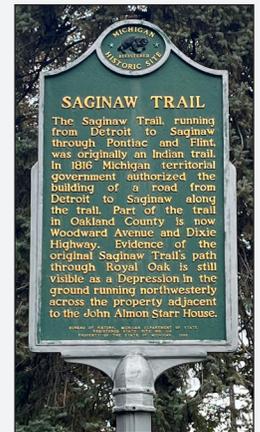
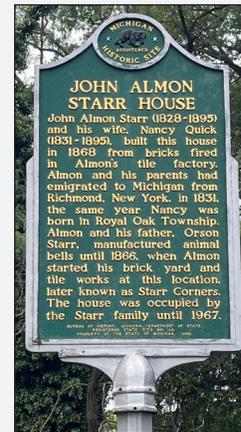
I regret that when David Penney and I first published *Twigs and Acorns* in 1996, we used the name John Almon Starr many times in the book. I now think that was a mistake.

I have been a docent at the Orson Starr House, circa 1845, now owned by the City of Royal Oak, for 31 years. I have read everything I could find about the Starr family. About five years ago, I began to wonder about the "John" in the name "John Almon Starr."

**I OBTAINED COPIES OF CENSUS RECORDS** from 1840 to 1900 and noted that the son of Orson and Rhoda was always listed as Almon. I talked to the author of the first article I had read using the name "John Almon Starr," and he couldn't recall whether he had used it intentionally or accidentally. Then I talked to Almon's descendants, and they said they had never heard of "John" as part of Almon's name. One of the great-grandsons provided me with copies of the family record page from three family Bibles, listing the birth and marriage of Almon Starr.

At the Orson Starr house, 3123 North Main Street, there is a package of Starr family papers. In it are several receipts for taxes signed Almon Starr when he was Royal Oak Township treasurer.

I feel that the family history, family records, census records and his own signature prove that "John" was not in his name. As a historian, however, I have to say "...until we have proof to the contrary," his name was Almon Starr. Let's call him just Almon Starr. This correction extends to the state historical marker erected on his land.



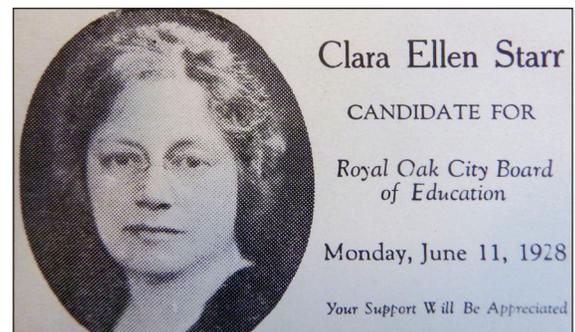
Photographs by Ellen Kehoe

**Based on further research about Almon Starr's name, the two-sided Michigan Registered Historic Site marker at 3123 Crooks Road on the grounds of his former home is now believed to incorrectly read "John Almon Starr."**

## Almon, Nancy and Clara Starr • Continued from Page 9

supervision of the music programs at all of Detroit's junior high schools. For years, she gave private music lessons out of the family home on Crooks Road.

In 1928, Clara was elected to the three-member school board of the former Starr School district. She continued to serve after the district consolidated with Royal Oak. She served seven years as vice president of the seven-member board and in 1935 became the first woman president. She retired from the school board in 1948. Clara died October 20, 1955, while waiting for a performance of the Detroit Symphony.



# Looking Back

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

What was happening in Royal Oak...

## 50 years ago — 1973

**POPULATION EXPLOSIONS** may worry economists and ecologists but Director Robert Willson says he's happy about a flurry of summer births at the Detroit Zoological Park. "I'm just pleased as punch, but I can't explain the off-season births," Willson said. Included in the births are three Formosan deer, seven ostrich and several baboons. Willson says two Siberian tigers also are expecting as well as two lions. Willson said the youngsters, which normally arrive in the spring, probably will be sold to other zoos, perhaps bringing in as much as \$5,000.

\*\*\*

**A GRAND RAPIDS FIRM** will pay for a traffic study which could bring a 225,000 square foot shopping center northeast of Fourteen Mile and Coolidge in Royal Oak. The Royal Oak City Commission Monday night (Oct. 9) approved the study after learning Meijer Inc. would pay the entire \$6,155 cost. The center would be the largest in Royal Oak, topping the Northwood Shopping Center at Thirteen and Woodward which has about 200,000 square feet of shopping space. Planning Director Lewis E. McDaniel said the Meijer facility would be occupied completely by two stores operated by the corporation and the shopping center would not compete with downtown Royal Oak for new businesses.

## 60 years ago — 1963

**ROYAL OAK IS EXPECTED** to re-emphasize its preference for the proposed Ten-Mile route of the East-West Expressway (later I-696) at a meeting with the state Highway Department planners tonight (Oct. 9) at city hall. City Commissioners, administrators and school officials have prepared detailed reports that point out the advantages of the Ten-Mile route and the disadvantages of the proposed Eleven-Mile alignment. City Planner Norman J. Bowman says his report will indicate that the Ten-Mile route running along the city's southern border would encourage development of an industrial park area there, add to the city's assessed valuation eventually and cause the least neighborhood disruption. The Eleven-Mile route would run through solidly residential areas, split the city and school district, and cause a sharp loss of valuation, Bowman said.

## 60 Years Ago — 1963



**A KID AT HEART** or so Lori and Steve Violante's dad described himself when he made this jack-o-lantern of pumpkin and squash for his youngsters. He decided to hold a contest for all South Oakland jack-o-lantern makers at his store, the Holiday Market in Royal Oak.

## 60 Years Ago — 1963

### Alarmingly Reassuring

\* It was a mistake; but somewhat reassuring.

The new fire alarm system at St. Mary's High School, Royal Oak, was being installed today and the workman gave it a test ring. It worked better than he expected.

Sister Bernadine Marie said the installer didn't realize the new system was hooked up to an alarm at the Royal Oak headquarters fire station.

Students thought it was just another fire drill until they saw four fire engines within 70 seconds of the alarm.

The school is four blocks from the first station.

\*\*\*

**A FEDERAL GRANT** for Oakland County's planned Children's Village apparently has killed chances for a new South Oakland Health Center for at least two years, maybe longer. Funds set aside for the new health center will be used instead to match the \$323,000 federal grant for Children's Village, according to a key county official. It means the county will have to start again to set aside funds for a new health center to replace the one at Fourth and Stephenson in Royal Oak. The move is the third blow to a new health center for the county's most populous area in less than a year. County officials attempted to build an \$800,000 structure financed 50-50 with federal and county funds on William Beaumont Hospital property on Webster, west of Coolidge but ran into opposition from residents.

Continued on Page 12

### 70 years ago — 1953

**SWELTERING MICHIGAN** suffered its 10th straight day of 90-degree temperatures today (Sept. 2) but forecasters said the record-breaking heat wave has just about run its course. The weather bureau said today's high ranged between 90 degrees in the northern portion of the state to 98 in the southern areas. But a cool air front moving in from the northwest was expected to bring welcome relief tonight.

Wednesday's high was 99 in Royal Oak. Despite continuing heat, water pressures were better than at any time since the heat wave began.

\*\*\*

**IN THE 71 YEARS** since the first Labor Day celebration, the average union member has moved up from a lower economic stratum virtually into the middle class. Factory workers were earning their highest average hourly pay in history as of mid-July — \$1.77, including overtime and other premium pay. And employment was at almost a record high level. There were almost 5 million more non-farm workers in July than at the time of the Korean outbreak in June 1950.

\*\*\*

**ANOTHER NEW DEVICE** in the movies' race towards greater reality is making its debut in South Oakland. The Washington Theatre announces completion of its installation of stereophonic sound. A stereo sound adds audio "depth" to what the movie-goer sees on the screen.

\*\*\*

**A PETITION PROTESTING** the high accident rate on a curve on Crooks south of Thirteen Mile in Royal Oak will be presented to the city commission Tuesday night, Oliver Green, 3123 Crooks, said today (Sept. 1).

"There have been three accidents on the curve in the last two weeks," said Green, "and we want something done about it."

Traffic along the road travels at a high rate of speed, Green said. When drivers attempt to make the turn, they often lose control of their cars and skid into an embankment on the side of the road. "We think that a blinker light and more curve signs should be placed on Crooks, so that drivers will know they are coming to a bad corner," he said.

Last Monday afternoon, a 10-ton DPW truck used to collect garbage and rubbish in the city turned over while trying to round the curve. Last spring, a bakery truck was smashed when a driver failed to make the turn.

### 80 years ago — 1943

**THE CITY OF TREES COMMITTEE** received its fall shipment of trees with 17 extra Norway maple and American elms which are available to anyone on a first come, first serve arrangement. The fruit trees will be in later, it was announced by the city. These trees will be planted by the city.

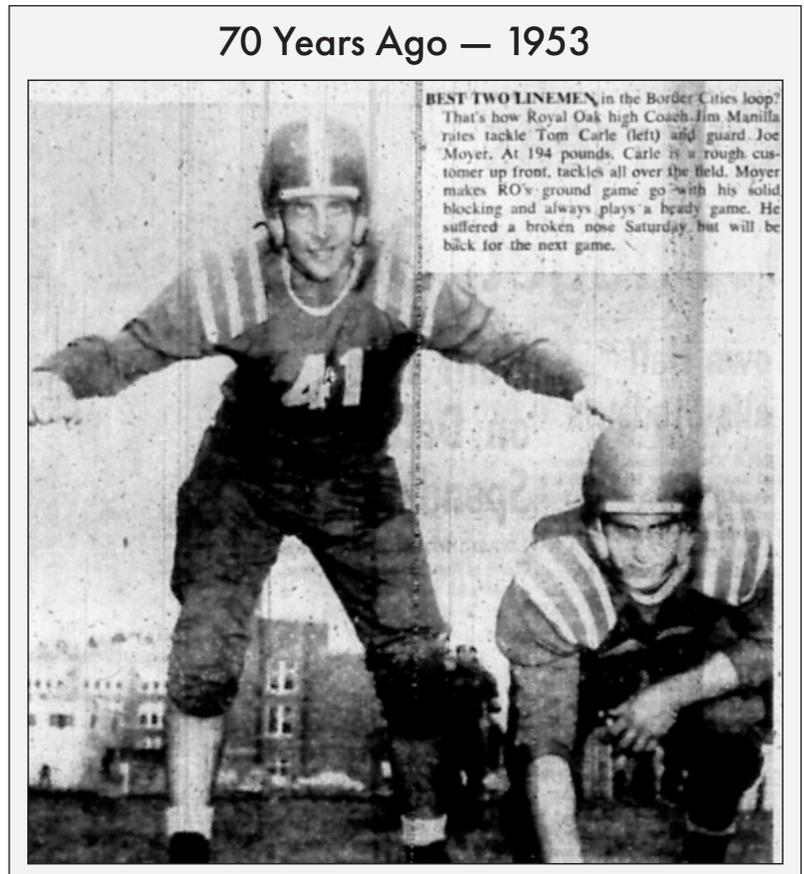
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**CITY MANAGER EDWARD M. SHAFER** will arrange a meeting with representatives of Martin Lines Inc., to determine on what basis, if any, the company will resume motorbus service to the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant. The company discontinued service from Royal Oak to the plant Sept. 11.

\*\*\*

**THE DERAILING OF THE** first car of a D.U.R. (Detroit Urban Railroad) freight train tied up traffic on Fourth Street and held the Grand Trunk southbound evening train at the station for about an hour. A defective track on the interurban train caused the first car to leave the track and skid across the curb, blocking both the street and the Grand Trunk tracks.

Continued on Page 13



90 Years Ago — 1933

**Four Tired Little Boys  
End Journey In Royal Oak  
“200 Miles From Detroit”**

**FOUR YOUTHFUL ADVENTURERS**, en route from Detroit to Pontiac, sat in a row at the Royal Oak Police station last night (Sept. 18), dirty of face and tired of body but convinced they were “200 miles from home.” The four, Jimmy and Donald Cloven, ages 7 and 9, and Harry and Stuart Maccallum Mhor, ages 11 and 9, started walking from Detroit yesterday morning to visit an uncle of the Maccallum Mhor boys in Pontiac.

After alternately riding and walking, with a side trip to the State Fair grounds, they reached Ten Mile Road and Woodward Avenue. Here, a kind-hearted storekeeper gave the hungry wanderers some cookies and oranges and notified police who informed the Cloven boys' parents of their whereabouts.

Keeping their eyes wide open by sheer obstinacy, the four refused to consider what punishment might be meted out to them upon their return home. Jimmy denied that his father would wield a razor strap. “He uses his belt,” Jimmy said, as he munched two cookies. The Cloven brothers live at 11752 Withorn Street, Detroit, and their companions at 11831 Flanders Avenue.

The car was replaced on the tracks in an hour and the D.U.R. was able to proceed after the load had been shifted somewhat.

90 years ago — 1933

**OPENING OF THE MOST** modern Great Atlantic and Pacific “A” store at 414 South Washington Ave. will take place today (Sept. 14). The store, built by the Kresge Building Corporation expressly for the A&P, is specially designed for a super grocery and meat market, with the latest type of ventilation system throughout. The store, working under the National Recovery Act code, will employ 30 persons. All will be local residents. The store will include five major departments: Grocery, meat, delicatessen, vegetable, and bakery.

100 years ago — 1923

**“WITH SHINING MORNING FACE”** nearly 1,600 boys and girls of Royal Oak entered the graded schools at the fall opening Wednesday morning (Sept. 5). It is still impossible to determine the number entering the high school grades, but school officials are positive of a record enrollment.

The high school building this year for the first time will house only the junior and senior high school students, which includes from the seventh to the twelfth grade. Heretofore the lower grades have also been taught in this building.

The five grade school buildings are comfortably filled, reports Supt. Frank Hendry. The Whittier building has the largest enrollment with 500 followed by Longfellow with 410. The Union school reports 380, Grant 225, and Northwood 75, making a total of 1,590. These figures will very likely change within the next few days, as the pupils are shifted from one building to another, and as more come. “Last year at this time, we had 1,350 pupils enrolled in the grades,” said Supt. Hendry, which makes an increase of nearly 20 percent. Twelve new teachers have been added to the staff of grades teachers. Three of them are filling positions vacated last year. Eleven new ones have been placed in the high school. (See the box below for illustrations of the high school and Whittier Elementary.)

\*\*\*

**ROYAL OAK'S WATER SUPPLY**, now badly depleted by the hundreds of new taps and the enormously increased use, will be more than doubled in the near future. The new well, which gave the contractors so much trouble in drilling, is completed and as soon as the pump installation can be finished will pour 2,000,000 gallons a day into the city's main.

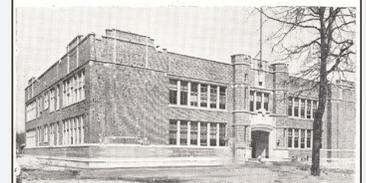
*Looking Back entries are taken from articles in The Daily Tribune and in some cases the actual wording is used to convey the language, wording and punctuation of the time.*

100 Years Ago — 1923



Above left, the original Royal Oak High School (later Clara Barton Junior High) at Main and University.

Royal Oak's Newest School  
Completed This Year



Whittier School

Royal Oak High School	1913	Thos. W. Lacy School	1920
St. Mary's Academy	1915	Parker School	1920
Mollen Wright Lumber Co.	1916	Ford Sales and Service	1921
Longfellow School	1919	Berkley School	1921
Oak Ridge School	1920	Royal Oak Savings Bank	1922

**N. A. STARR**

General Contractor and Builder

112 Howarth Bldg.

Royal Oak, Michigan

At right, an ad showing the new Whittier Elementary School at Farnum and Alexander.

# What Year Did These Ads Appear?

The ROHS newsletter editors find many interesting advertisements while searching in *The Daily Tribune* archives and other historical publications. Enjoy reading these charming ads of yesteryear and see how well you can guess the year in which they appeared. In the box are all the possible answers. Answers may be used more than once. See how well you did on Page 7.



(a)



(b)



(c)

Here are all the possible answers. Some years are used more than once.

1923, 1933, 1943, 1953, 1963

Good Luck!



(d)



(e)



(f)



(g)

## Check Out Our Website and Like Us on Facebook

Keep up to date on society and museum happenings on our website — [www.royaloakhistoricalsociety.com](http://www.royaloakhistoricalsociety.com) — and by following our Facebook page. Missed reading a newsletter? You can find past issues on the website!

Founded in 1939, the Royal Oak Historical Society is a private, non-governmental organization of volunteers. We collect, display and preserve information and objects of Royal Oak's past for current and future generations. Throughout the year we present various special exhibits and provide a venue for other groups and individuals to display their collections.

Donations to the Royal Oak Historical Society are gratefully accepted.



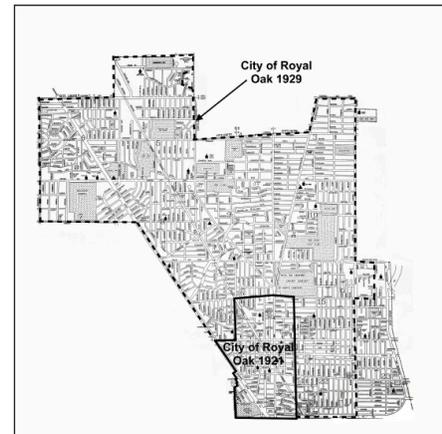
ROHS members Bob Muller and Don Drife have written a number of booklets which are for sale at the museum and on the website. Among the topics:

- *Growth of the Village and City of Royal Oak*
- *Indian Trails through Royal Oak Township*
- *The Interurban*
- *The History of a Piece of Land* (additional coauthor: Theodore G. Vickers)

## History at Your Fingertips

For a presentation on how Royal Oak became a city, go to [royaloakhistoricalsociety.com](http://royaloakhistoricalsociety.com) and see Bob Muller's video entitled "The Growth of the Village and City of Royal Oak."

In it, Bob takes us on a journey of the 13 steps of the City of Royal Oak's annexation from Royal Oak Township between 1836 to 1957.



## Warm Up at Fall Soccer and Football Games in a Royal Oak Commemorative Sweatshirt



The Royal Oak Historical Society Museum has reproduced a popular sweatshirt from Royal Oak's 75th anniversary in black with orange lettering.

It's available for purchase at the Museum and online at the Royal Oak Historical Society website for \$30.





ROYAL OAK HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
1411 West Webster Rd. • Royal Oak, MI 48073  
248.439.1501 • ROYALOAKHISTORICALSOCIETY.COM



ROYAL OAK  
*Historical Society*

**MEMBERSHIP AND  
DONATIONS FORM**

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone # \_\_\_\_\_ (cell) \_\_\_\_\_ (home)  
Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

The date on the mailing label is your membership renewal date.

**PLEASE INDICATE MEMBERSHIP LEVEL:**

Individual: \$20 \_\_\_\_\_ Family: \$30 \_\_\_\_\_ Supporter: \$50 \_\_\_\_\_  
Century: \$100 \_\_\_\_\_ Club: \$200 \_\_\_\_\_ Premium: \$300 \_\_\_\_\_ Benefactor: \$500 \_\_\_\_\_

**GENERAL DONATION:** \$ \_\_\_\_\_

*Thank You for Your Support!*

Make checks payable to: Royal Oak Historical Society, 1411 W. Webster Road, Royal Oak, MI 48073

Dues also are payable online at [royaloakhistoricalsociety.com](http://royaloakhistoricalsociety.com). Click on the Membership link to pay or set up automatic annual dues payment. For more information about membership levels and benefits, visit the website.