

Society Helps Ketchel Relatives Restore Gravesite

By Matthew Gryczan

Near the Richmond Street exit of Holy Cross Cemetery, a white Vermont marble monument stands out prominently among the gravestones in terms of size and historical significance.

It's a tribute to Stanley Ketchel, one of America's greatest middleweight boxers and – along with U.S. President Gerald R. Ford and professional boxer Floyd Mayweather Jr. -- one of Grand Rapids favorite sons.

In October of 1910, thousands of people lined sidewalks in the cold drizzling rain to catch a glimpse of Ketchel's light gray hearse pulled by four horses, followed by a retinue of 20 more carriages bearing family and friends. The funeral cortege had made the overland drive all the way from the family farm in Belmont.

As the hearse and carriages passed, many fell in step behind the procession that made a loop through the downtown, crossed the river at Bridge Street and snaked to St. Adalbert's Basilica, where six girls bore funeral flowers and the Polish Military Band played Chopin's familiar Funeral March.

The estimated crowd of 5,000 people made it the second largest funeral in Michigan's history – second only to Jerry Ford's, according to some sources.

But over the past century, the memory of Stanley Ketchel –

whose birth name was Stanisław Kiecal – has faded, and time has taken its toll on the monument.

At the beginning of October, a tattered and faded Polish flag flew from a makeshift broom stick flagpole nearby, and tacky items – even a live bullet – littered the marker. The 9-foot high monument is stained, caulking that sheds the rainwater is falling from its sides, and a concrete collar about its base has fallen apart. It's hardly a fitting grave marker for a champion.

To reverse the indignation, the Polish Heritage Society has partnered with the descendants of Ketchel and cemetery staff to clean, recaulk and restore the concrete collar to its original state.

Using its status as a 501(c)(3) organization, the society is soliciting donations to restore the monument in spring at a cost of \$2,000. Individuals and companies that donate to 501(c)(3) public charities may be able to deduct their gifts for tax purposes up to a certain percentage of Adjusted Gross Income, but donors need to confirm this with their accountants.

All donors who give \$25 or more will have their names printed in The Echo, the PHS website and its Facebook page. Major donors may receive special recognition for their contributions. Contributions can be made by check sent to the Polish Heritage Society (See



(From left) Don Ketchel, Shirley Gressler-Norton and Diane Lorenski spruced up the monument to Stanley Ketchel by removing a makeshift flagpole and items left by well-wishers. They are grandnieces and grandnephew of Ketchel.

page 2 for address) or to its Paypal account.

Ketchel's extended family made up of grandnieces, grandnephews and their spouses organized a work bee on Oct. 22 at the monument to remove the makeshift flagpole and flag and weatherworn items left by well-wishers.

Shirley Gressler-Norton, grandniece of Ketchel and spokesperson for the descendants, said family members tried to maintain the concrete collar, but "over the years, it deteriorated to the point that it can't be repaired.

"We would love to see Stanley's monument brought back

to its original grandeur, and we certainly want to encourage people to visit the gravesite. It's a big part of our family's history, but it's also a significant story in Grand Rapids history."

Gressler-Norton said her family has committed several hundred dollars for the cleaning of Ketchel's actual headstone behind the monument and markers of his parents and siblings that are flanking it.

The PHS conducted research on the monument to confirm its historical significance to the local Polish-American community, identified contractors who can perform the work,

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Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids

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The Polish Heritage Society of Grand Rapids promotes Polish/Lithuanian culture in the metro Grand Rapids. The Society meets on the 3rd Monday of every month except for December and general meetings in June and October. The society publishes this newsletter monthly. We invite story ideas and content contributions. For more information, please contact Matthew Gryczan, Richard Panek or Marilyn Lignell by writing to phsgrandrapids@gmail.com.

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and developed the budget. The society is now working with cemetery staff to coordinate the project and collect funds that will be paid directly to the contractors.

The Ketchel monument has been a lodestone for decades for boxing champions and those just entering the sport. When asked in 2000 if he had any personal plans while he was in Detroit for his only bout in Michigan, heavyweight champion Mike Tyson said his only desire was to visit Grand Rapids and pay respects to Ketchel.

Aspiring boxers still visit the monument to the "Michigan Assassin" – often toasting "Old Stanley" with a shot of liquor after they've enjoyed a night on the town. There are other local reminders of his boxing prowess and local ties.

Along the 400 block of Bridge Street on the city's west side stands the larger-than-life bronze statue of Ketchel. The statue's sculptor Ann Hirsch said in an



Mourners pay their respects at Stanley Ketchel's monument that was featured prominently in what was then called the Polish Catholic Cemetery, now Holy Cross Cemetery.

interview with the MLive Media Group during its unveiling in 2015 that "there's a bit of Superman in him. As a Polish American, Ketchel tested himself and stood his ground."

The statue was part of the Grand Rapids Community Legends project commissioned by

local philanthropist Peter Secchia to immortalize those who gave Grand Rapids a sense of place. "You can't do what you want to do if you don't know where you came from," Secchia said at the unveiling ceremony.

At the northeast corner of Third Street and Stocking Avenue, there stands a bronze plaque donated by the PHS to the city of Grand Rapids that marks the site close to 177 Stocking St. where his family once lived. His father emigrated from Austrian-Poland in the mid 1800s, and his maternal grandfather emigrated from Russia-Poland in 1857.

Ketchel attended St. Adalbert's grade school and Union High School, then ran away from home at age 15 in search of adventure and fortune in the American West.

And adventure he found.

Boxing historian F. Daniel Somracks wrote that Ketchel worked for food in mining

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The funeral service at St. Adalbert's Basilica for Stanley Ketchel was said to have drawn more than 5,000 mourners, making it the second largest funeral held in Grand Rapids, surpassed only by the funeral of U.S. President Gerald R. Ford.

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camps throughout the West, then finally found his calling as a fighter in the boomtown of Butte, Mont. At a fair in Butte, he knocked out the resident champion of a boxing booth with one punch in the first round.

Ketchel became an attraction at the Casino Theater taking on all comers at \$20 per week, Somracks wrote. He quoted Ketchel as saying: "I hit them so hard they use to fall over the footlights and land in people's laps."

In addition to being a saloon, brothel and dance hall, the Casino had a prize fighting arena where Ketchel launched his career as a professional boxer under the "Michigan Assassin" nickname. Ketchel moved his campaign to California to get bigger purses, and during the next six years racked up a remarkable boxing record: with 64 bouts, an official record of 52-4-4, with 49 knockouts and four no-decisions.

But at age 24, Ketchel was already starting to buckle under his fast and furious lifestyle. Although he made a sizable fortune at prize fighting, Ketchel spent without care. One boxing columnist wrote that Ketchel was perfect for the boxing mob: "He punched hard, drove fast, chased women and toted a gun." One might also add a weakness for gambling and drinking.

Weary and attempting to regain his strength, he returned to the Little Pine Island farm in the summer of 1910, and there met Rollin P. Dickerson, a millionaire and schoolfriend of his mother. Dickerson took an instant liking to Ketchel and invited him to recuperate at his 860-acre ranch at Conway, Mo.

and act as the ranch manager.

Ketchel made the trip to Conway in September, entertaining ideas to leave prizefighting and invest in his own farm and lumbering business. Soon two people arrived at the Dickerson ranch who would prove to be Ketchel's undoing: Walter A. Dibley, and his girlfriend, Goldie Smith.

Dibley, who was twice court martialed before deserting the U.S. Navy, signed on as farm help at the Dickerson ranch under the alias of Walter A. Hurtz. He had met Smith, who at 22 was a three-time divorcee, only weeks before. They portrayed themselves at the ranch as husband and wife.

On the morning of Oct. 15, Ketchel was seated at a kitchen table, waiting for Smith to prepare breakfast, when Dibley burst through the door with a .22 caliber rifle in hand and yelled "Get your hands up," according to Somarcks' account of the murder. As Ketchel slowly reached for his pistol, Dibley shot him in the back. The bullet pierced his lung.

With Ketchel mortally wounded on the floor, Dibley and Smith took a diamond ring and wad of cash from the boxer's pocket and fled. Smith was captured within hours and -- after first asserting that Dibley was defending her honor after Ketchel had sexually assaulted her -- she confessed that it had been a planned robbery. Smith told the authorities that she didn't know Dibley would shoot Ketchel.

Dibley found shelter that night at the home of a neighboring farmer, who soon learned of the shooting and apprehended him the next day.

Both Dibley and Smith were found guilty by jury trial in 1911

for first degree murder and robbery. At sentencing, both were given life in prison. But on appeal, Smith's conviction was overturned because there wasn't evidence she conspired to kill Ketchel, and she served a total of 17 months before being set free. Dibley was paroled in 1934.

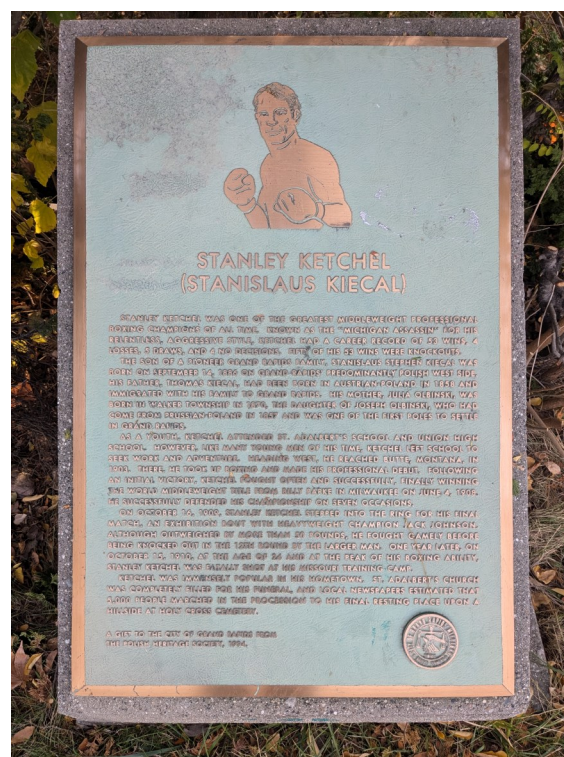
Virtually all Ketchel left behind was a farm near Little Pine Island that was heavily mortgaged and a diamond stick pin and ring -- both hocked. His gold and diamond studded championship belt from the middleweight championship of the world was repaired at Siegel Jewelers in Grand Rapids and sold for \$300.

"He was his own worst enemy," said James Lombard, attorney who served as executor of Ketchel's estate. "Had he been one half as shrewd in his private life as he was in studying the weakness of his opponents

in the ring, he might now be alive and well, a rich man.

Although he didn't leave much in terms of tangible assets, Ketchel left a considerable legacy for Polish-Americans living in Grand Rapids. Ketchel was named to the International Boxing Hall of Fame, and he is enshrined in the Michigan Sports Hall of Fame. In 2004, The Ring magazine ranked Ketchel as the eighth-best middleweight in history.

Since 1989, the Michigan Golden Gloves organization annually has been giving out the Stanley Ketchel Spirit of the Golden Gloves award at the conclusion of its West Michigan tournament to the boxer who "best exemplifies the courage, desire, spirit and respect expected of a Golden Gloves fighter."



A bronze plaque presented to the city of Grand Rapids by the PHS in 1994 marks the boyhood home of Stanley Ketchel.

POLISH HERITAGE SOCIETY'S ANNUAL

Wigilia Dinner & Program

Saturday, December 7, 2024

West Leonard Banquet Facility- 1140 Muskegon NW

Marbled, Dark Rye and Rustic Breads with Horseradish, Parsley and Chive Butters

Signature Recipe Cream Herring with Lemon and Pickled Turnips

Rustic Potato, Parsnip and Carrot Soup with Fresh Herbs

Filled Farmers Cheese Potato Dumpling with Fried Cabbage and Sour Cream

Haddock Filet Baked with Cucumber Aioli and Panko Crumbs

Served alongside winter medley of fresh peas, chard and asparagus

Roasted Golden Beet Salad with honey and walnut dressing

Authentic Polish Desserts

Wine served with fish course

Social Hour 5:00-6:00PM / Dinner and Program at 6:00PM

Polish Koledy: Featuring Jarek Kozal and Nick Palmer

\$40.00 per person-prepaid: Checks payable to Polish Heritage Society

*****Reservation deadline November 18, 2024*****

Send to PHS-c/o Marilyn Lignell Phone: 616-443-3773

2858 W Sandrel CT NE

Grand Rapids, MI 49505

Name: _____

Phone # _____

of tickets @\$40.00 _____ Amount enclosed _____

I would like to be seated with _____

Email: _____

PHS Membership News



By Marilyn Lignell

We have a lot to look forward to in December – everything from our annual Wigilia dinner to the pickup of delicious pierogies, courtesy of the Malbork Dance Group. But let's do a quick review of November first, as so much has already happened to promote Polish heritage!

PHS President Teresa Bonham, cultural ambassadors Rich and Mary Panek, and yours truly manned a booth at the Cultural Heritage Festival of the Grand Rapids Public Museum on Nov. 2 to educate visitors on the centuries old culture of Poland.

A lot of people asked good questions about the history of Polish heritage in Grand Rapids – and likewise we learned about other cultures! "It really is a fun way to engage with people and hear of their ethnicity, while educating them on some of our culture and history," Teresa said.

Those Paneks are whirlwinds when it comes to engaging our membership in authentic Eastern European culture and traditions. They hosted a Sunday afternoon party at their beautiful home to make ornaments that will be given out at our Wigilia dinner in December. A dozen people attended the party, and as usual, Rich and

Mary were consummate hosts

They obtained all of the materials necessary – some of which I still can't figure out how they got! – and they showed us examples of how to assemble the ornaments. We broke into teams and went to work like Santa's elves! I won't spoil the surprise by telling you what we made, but they turned out beautifully.

Having worked our fingers to the bone (not really, it was so much fun to craft and chat!), Mary made a Chicken and Pork Terrine and Kulebiak roll that were out of this world, along with a wonderful assortment of cheeses, crackers and chocolates.

Our PHS General Membership Meeting is at 11 a.m. Nov. 16 at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church near John Ball Park, and I am betting that the meeting will have happened by the time you receive this newsletter. We are scheduled to take a tour of the church guided by Father Ron Floyd so that we can learn more about Sacred Heart – one of the original Polish parishes in Grand Rapids.

Sorry about the delay in getting the November letter out so late, but situations continued to change while Matt was writing the lead story on Ketchel's monument. We expect to be right on time in December and thereafter.

Speaking of being on time in December, it's time to get your tickets for the PHS' Annual Wigilia Dinner!

Chef Krystal with Krystal Palace Catering is back this year and we'll be maintaining our traditions of Polish culture as well.

Talking about wonderful food,

the Grand Rapids chapter of the P.R.C.U.A. Malbork Dance Group is holding its annual pierogi fundraiser for new costumes. The local chapter's director Natalia Szczygiel said you need to order and pay for the items by Nov. 22, with a pickup date of Dec. 5 at St. Isidore's Benevolent Aid Society/Diamond Hall, 435 Diamond Ave NE.

Pierogi are sold frozen in one-pound packages (about a dozen pierogi) for \$8. There are three varieties of pierogi packages: potato/Farmer's cheese filling; sauerkraut filling; or potato/cheddar cheese filling. To order please email MalborkDance-

Group@gmail.com or call Szczygiel at (586)747-0421.

We welcome new members Brenda Veenstra, Shirley Gressler-Norton and David Johnson. Also joining as lifetime members are Mary (Arsulowicz) Payne and Wendy Gulbis.

On a solemn note, we offer our deepest condolences to former PHS President Jeff Portko. Jeff's love of his life Lynnette Kruchkow-Portko died on Oct. 23. A celebration of life was held at the Broadway Bar where friends and family shared memories and stories of love. Our thoughts and prayers are with you Jeff.

Join Detroit Polonia on Visit to Grand Rapids

It will be East meets West on Dec. 7 when a bus load of Detroiters visits Grand Rapids to learn more about our Polish heritage and to enjoy local food and fun!

All members of the Polish Heritage Society are welcome to join our brethren from the east side to tour St. Isidore's Church, have lunch at the Polish National Aid Society (Jackson Street hall), visit Holy Cross Cemetery to view our Soldiers Monument and the grave of Stanley Ketchel, then cap off the trip with a stop at the Christkindl Markt.

Tickets to the event are \$25 per person for local PHS members, which includes the tour of St. Isidore's at 11:30 a.m., buffet lunch of authentic Polish food at Jackson Street hall, and a guided tour of the Holy Cross Cemetery lead by Matthew Gryczan in an authentic reproduction of a Polish colonel's uniform from World War I.

The bus trip is sponsored by the Polish Institute of Culture & Research at Orchard Lake and the Polish Genealogical Society of Michigan, with assistance from our PHS.

Those interested in learning more about the lunch and tours can visit www.picrol.org or contact Ania at (248) 836-1284. Tickets may be purchased online at <https://t.ly/Zfln7> or by sending a personal check to the Polish Institute of Culture & Research, 3535 Commerce Road, Orchard Lake, MI, 48324. Make checks payable to PICROL with memo: Grand Rapids Tour.

The deadline for buying tickets is Nov. 28.

"This is a wonderful opportunity for our local members to meet Polonia from the east side," PHS President Teresa Bonham said. "There is so much that we all can share!"



Join the Polish Heritage Society to receive our monthly newsletter and other benefits!

Annual Student Membership for full-time students through college \$5

Annual Adult Membership \$20

Annual Family or Business Membership \$35

Lifetime Membership \$150

ONLINE

You can join the Polish Heritage Society online by going to our website at <https://polishheritagesociety.com/>, filling out the Membership form and paying by using the PayPal Button.

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Fill out this form and send a personal check made out to the Polish Heritage Society to this address:

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P.O. Box 1844
Grand Rapids MI 49501-1844

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