



Message from the President . . .

Happy August!

We are deep into the summer, but we have a lot of summer left and with any luck the weather will moderate a little and the wildfire smoke will be a thing of the past. Our family has been very busy so far this August (and it's only the first week). We hosted my grandson's 8th birthday party at the cottage this weekend. He asked me back in April, which is his birthday month, but wanted his party delayed so the kids could swim and fish and boat. . . and boy did they ever. Harsens Island at its finest and everyone had a blast. One day to clean and my Book Club arrives later today. In a couple weeks our daughter from AZ visits the Island and then hosting a 90th birthday party for my dad...so much fun ahead!

Speaking of fun ahead, our very own Sue Wrobel is speaking August 9th on The Three Fires. It will be a great presentation that will be informative and fun for all ages, but especially kids . . . so bring them to them along!!

Our annual membership meeting is Saturday, August 16th at 10:00 at the museum. As always, everyone is welcome. A closed Board meeting will be held immediately after to elect officers for the next year.

Thank you to the volunteers who have hosted at the museum. There is still time to volunteer, if you have a couple hours to spare, we'd love to have you.

As always, thank you for your support!

Joyce

Joyce Hassen, President

On July 19, the museum hosted author Daniel F. Harrison. His lecture, "Voices from the Flats", was interesting and captivating. His study and analysis of geography, culture, and ecological transformation of the Flats brought a richness to the evidence and anecdotes he presented.

Thank you, Daniel, for sharing your knowledge and research!



Preserving Your History

We encourage, and would like to assist, islanders in getting their old photos, slides, negatives, and historical documents into digital format to preserve and/or display them. In addition, the Harsens Island Historical Society would like to collect digital copies of historical photos and documents of the island for the museum's collection.

You can bring photos, slides, negatives, or historical documents to the Museum to have them scanned and the digital copy put on a USB flash drive to take home along with the documents you brought for scanning. Some photos or documents may be of historic interest, and with the owner's permission, a digital copy would be retained by the Harsens Island Historical Society for the museum's collection.

The Harsens Island History Society is also looking for 8 mm or super 8 mm home movies taken on the island prior to 1960 for segments to be digitized and place in the archives. There would be **no fee for members**, but non-members would be asked to make a small donation.

You can make an appointment for scanning with Bob Williams at 248-388-0465 or email him at xharpspah@aol.com.



Harsens Island Fire Hall Dedication in 1938



Harsens Island Revenge playing

August 22 through August 28

at

Riverside Cinemas 3 - Marine City

<https://www.riversidecinemas.com/>

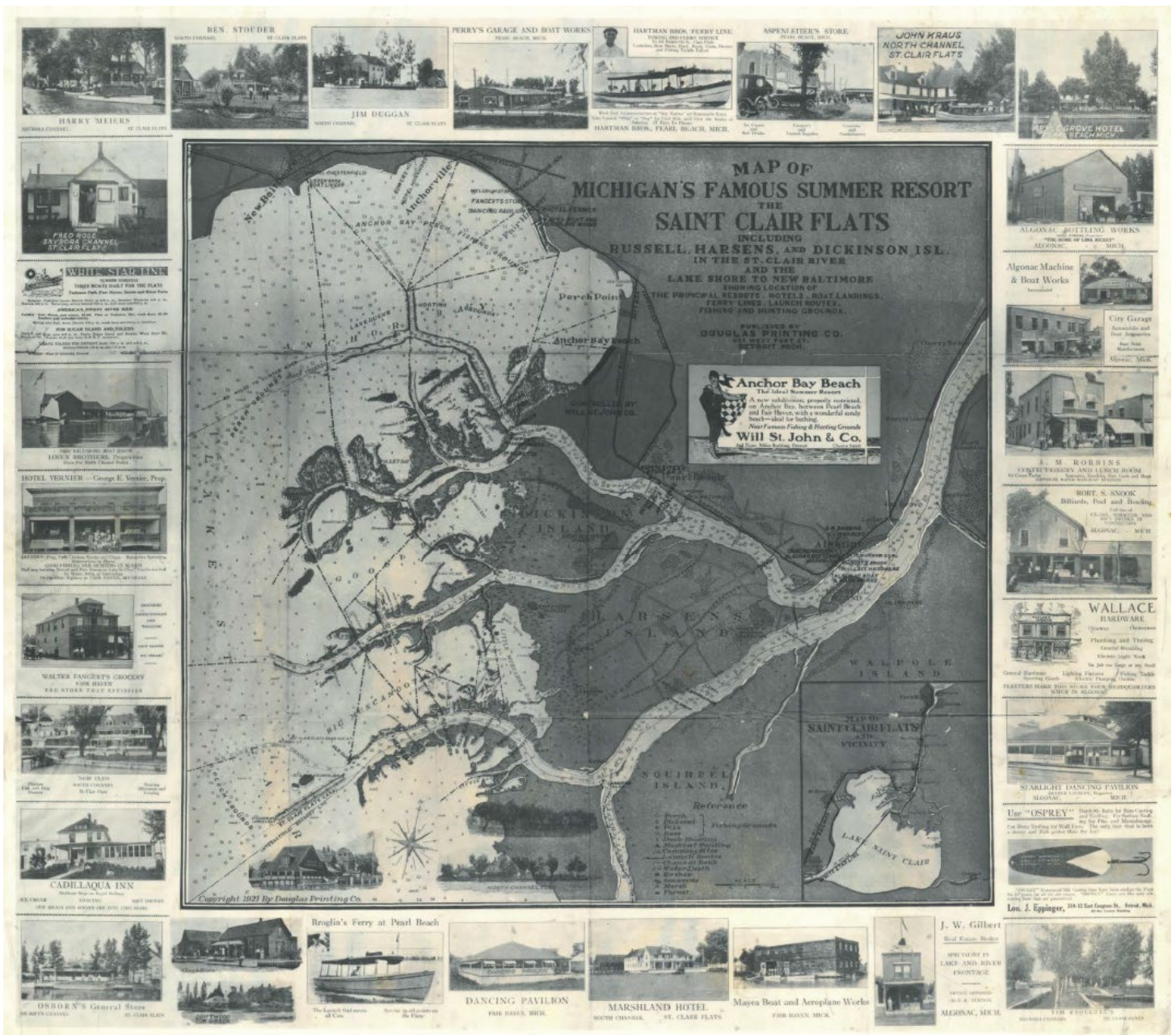
&

Emagine Macomb - Macomb

<https://www.emagine-entertainment.com/theatres/emagine-macomb/>

Map of Michigan's Famous Resorts and the St. Clair Flats 1921

Bob Williams was able to obtain this map of Michigan's Famous Resorts and the Saint Clair Flat from 1921. A great addition to the museum's archives.



HARSENS ISLAND / ST. CLAIR FLATS
Historical Society Museum

Saturday ~ August 9 ~ 11:00 AM



“History of the Three Fires”

~ PRESENTED BY SUE WROBEL ~

This presentation covers the history of Native Americans during Jacob Harsens' era and aligns with Michigan's 3rd-grade history standards. All ages are welcome, including the young at heart!

Free Refreshments | Suggested donation: **Ten Dollars**

Harsens Island Historical Museum
3058 South Channel, Harsens Island, MI

HARSENS ISLAND
ST. CLAIR FLATS
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
BUILDING THE TABLE
PRESERVING OUR PAST

There was a great turn out for the “History of the Three Fires” on August 9. Thank you Sue Wrobel for the wonderful lecture on how Indians lived in the 1700s – 1880s. Each authentic artifact she showed helped transport the audience through history.



Border Office Confronted Infamous Purple Gang

With the release of the movie, "Harsens Island Revenge", there is renewed interest in learning about the famous Purple Gang. Here is an article published in The Voice, February 11, 1967.

4 — THE VOICE

Border officer confronted infamous Purple Gang

Howard Blakemore studied the shadowy figures that faced him. With gun in hand, Blakemore, the chief immigration border patrol inspector for the St. Clair River region, knew that he was perhaps facing the most dangerous situation of his life.

With only one other border patrol officer with him, Blakemore stood just 60 feet from 20 members of Detroit's infamous Purple Gang.

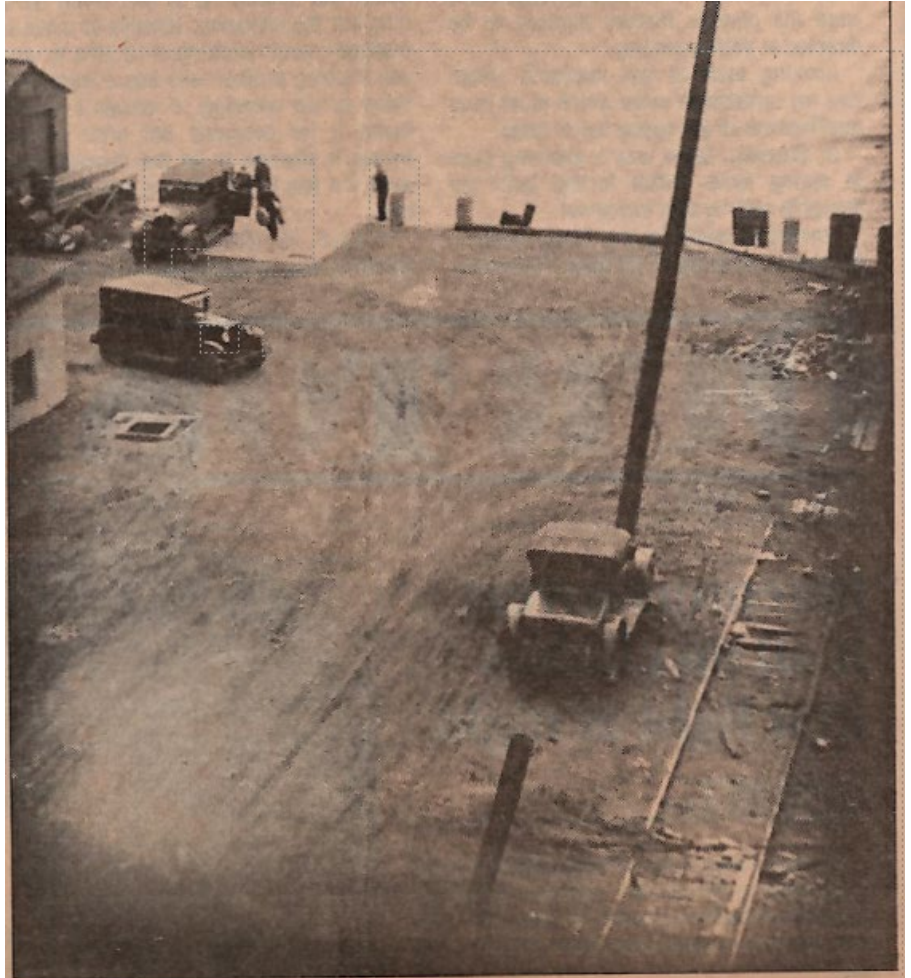
Blakemore was out about a mile from shore on Lake St. Clair not far from New Baltimore on this Feb. 17 evening in the year 1930. The winter had been extremely cold and the St. Clair River and Lake St. Clair were frozen. With prohibition—the outlawing of alcoholic beverages—now in its 11th year, Blakemore thought "the doorway to Canada was wide open" where liquor could still be legally purchased.

Through January and February, rum-runners used sleds, cars and iceboats to carry their illicit cargo. The ice was soon marked with hundreds of tire tracks.

The cars often travelled in convoys. Earlier that day, an informant had called Leonard Duncan, who was in charge of the border patrol's four-man post in New Baltimore. The informant reported that the Purple Gang had crossed Lake St. Clair toward Canada and would probably return about 9 p.m.

The Purple Gang was among the best known of the many gangs that thrived during the 1920s. With the huge profits to be made and Michigan's proximity to Canada, the state became a paradise for rum-running. One writer described the Detroit area "as though a sympathetic creator has fashioned the district expressly" for bootlegging operations.

As Larry Engelmann noted in "Intemperance—The Lost War Against Liquor," with Ontario counting 16 distilleries and 29 breweries, it "seemed a little like shouting fire in a crowded movie theater." Detroit alone tallied 15,000 blind pigs by the spring of 1930.



A Detroit News photographer took this picture of rum runners in 1929.

Supplying the wants of all these thirsty customers provided a great opportunity for gangs already involved in lawless activities. Among the gangs that quickly emerged was the Purple Gang, which Engelmann described as "a loose coalition of two different groups of young Jewish hoods." Originating in Detroit's east side, the Purple Gang defrauded insurance companies, extorted money from movie theaters and accepted contracts to "rub out" enemies of other criminals.

But it was the liquor business that provided the gang's greatest source of income. At one point, members supplied expensive "Old Log Cabin" Canadian whiskey to Chicago's Al Capone.

Though colorful and sometimes treated as folk heroes, members of the Purple Gang were often involved in gang warfare and shoot outs with police.

And now in the darkness that engulfed the

Continued on Page 6 . . .

Continued from page 5 . . . Purple Gang

ice of Lake St. Clair on that long ago February night, Howard Blakemore with only one other officer, confronted 20 members of this deadly Detroit gang.

Their convoy of 20 heavily-laden cars had stopped before a joint where water had surged up from below caused by the expansion and contraction of ice. While the Purple Gang pondered the situation, Blakemore and Bill McCombs raced across the hip deep water. Startled by this ambush, the gang fled to their cars and drove off leaving two cars behind, which were captured by Blakemore.

Feeling somewhat elated in this small victory against rum-runners, Blakemore suddenly realized that the gang had recovered their wits and were approaching McCombs and himself. They reminded Blakemore of "soldiers deployed across a field."

As the gap between Blakemore and the gangsters closed, Blakemore must have thought of Earl Roberts who had entered the border patrol the previous March. A few weeks after joining, Roberts was gunned

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safety assured, McCombs asked Blakemore if he would have carried out his threat.

Blakemore replied, "Yes, but I would hate to. Somewhere out there is the Canadian line. If we got across that line, we'd not be officers there and the shooting could start. We wouldn't have a leg to stand on."

In this victory over the Purple Gang, Blakemore found 816 quarts of liquor in the two captured Ford cars.

This remarkable encounter with the Purple Gang was narrated by Howard Blakemore from his California home in a series of letters written to Marine City area historian Kathryn Seestedt in 1979 and 1980. During his years in Marine City (1927-1941), Blakemore kept a detailed diary. The diary, which provided material for the letters, also were invaluable in his authorship of the book "Special Detail." This account of the border patrol was based on Blakemore's work in the St. Clair River District.

Both the book and the Blakemore letters can be found in the Marine City Public Library.

The Blakemore letters are replete with his activities as chief immigration border patrol inspector. Upon assuming this position in 1927, Blakemore was placed in charge of about 35 men located at four stations: Marine City, Port Huron, St. Clair and New Baltimore. Though the patrols aimed to apprehend aliens trying to sneak into the United States, the force was soon enlisted in the war against rum-runners.

In one letter, Blakemore described "an arrest in the St. Clair Flats that I don't think any of us will forget." In late February 1928, while on patrol on Harsen's Island, Blakemore looked in a window at Osbourne's Store and was surprised to see a "big pile of cases of beer."

After searching the building, the patrol found a large box that yielded 68 bottles of liquor and three sacks of money worth \$8,000. The proprietor of the business seemed relieved and exclaimed, "Thank God you fellows aren't hijackers!"

The patrol then destroyed 480 bottles of beer and placed the confiscated liquor on a sled. Since the elderly proprietor, who was under arrest, couldn't keep up, the officers placed the man upon the sled with the liquor.

The man later pled guilty and paid a fine of about \$500. Blakemore noted that the bootlegger was home before night.

Prohibition ended a few years after the incident. The great experiment had ended in failure. Instead of uplifting the morals of the nation, the 18th amendment had spawned a major crime wave. With the onset of the Depression in 1929 and a great increase in tax delinquencies, there also was a clamor for repeal to enable states to collect revenues from the legal sale of alcoholic beverages.

In December 1933, prohibition was ended with the proclamation of the 21st amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

DAYS GONE BY
BY RICHARD GONYEAU



<https://www.detroithistorical.org/learn/online-research/encyclopedia-of-detroit/purple-gang>

Harsens Island Historical Society Calendar 2025

Date	Day	Time	Event
August 9	Saturday	11:00 AM	Special Event – History of Three Fires presented by Sue Wrobel
August 16	Saturday	10:00 AM	Annual Membership Meeting at the Museum
August 16	Saturday	10:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
August 30	Saturday	11:00 AM	Labor Day Parade
September 20	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
October 4	Saturday	10:00 AM – 1:00 PM	Annual Pie Sale
October 18	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Meeting at the Museum
November 9	Sunday	3:00 PM	Remembrance Edmund Fitzgerald
November 15	Saturday	9:30 AM	Board Planning Meeting via Zoom
December 6	Saturday	10:00 AM – 1:00 PM	Cookie Walk
December 20	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

Mailing Address:

P.O. Box 44
Harsens Island MI 48028

Museum Address:

3058 S. Channel Dr.

www.harsensislandhistory.org

HISCFHS Board of Directors 2025

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Bob Williams

President

Joyce Hassen

1st Vice President

Chris Knight

2nd Vice President

Ellen Probst

Treasurer and Secretary

Corinne Trexler

Directors

Terry Wiggins

Sue Wrobel

Nancy Bonacquisti

Robert Bryson



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

Harsens Island Historical Society

The Harsens Island St. Clair Flats History Society has a quilt block on the building and a QR code is mounted next to the side door. Using the camera app on your phone, scan the code and it will show the link to the Historical Museum page in the [Quilt Trail](#) site.

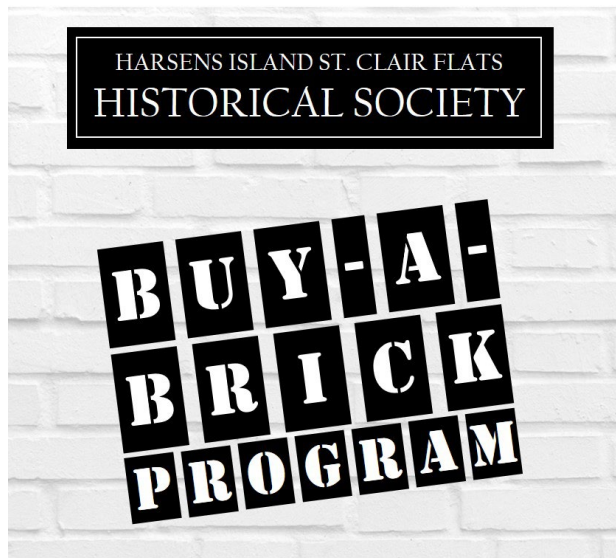
The [Historical Society of Michigan](#) published their 2024 Winter Issue of the Chronicle. The new Harsens Island Historical Society Quilt Block was mentioned in the magazine.



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 below.



PO Box 44
 Harsens Island
 MI 48028
 www.harsensislandhistory.org

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION 2025

Last Name: _____ First Name: _____ Spouse: _____

Primary Mailing Address: _____ Member No. _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Home Phone: _____ Cell Phone: _____ Spouse Cell: _____

E-Mail Address: _____ Spouse E-Mail: _____

Additional Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Additional Phone: _____ Membership Type: _____

Annual Renewal Dues:

- Individual (1 Member Only) \$20.00
- Family (1-2 Adults + Children < 18) \$30.00
- Business \$50.00

Lifetime Dues:

- Lifetime Individual \$300.00
- Lifetime Family \$500.00

Building Donation / Roof: \$ _____ Other Donation: \$ _____

(* The necessary roof replacement in 2024 has left reserve funds low)

If desired, please specify use: _____

Newsletters are emailed to members. If you require newsletters via postal mail, please write a note on your returned application.

Please complete and send with a check made payable to: **Harsens Island Historical Society.**

Mail to: Harsens Island St. Clair Historical Society, P.O. Box 44, Harsens Island, MI 48028

OFFICE USE ONLY:

Date received: _____

Check # _____ Amount \$ _____

I would be interested in volunteering as a museum host this summer (greeting visitors, answer questions, if possible, & record museum shop sales).