

Hyde Park History

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Joan Levin awaits an important telephone call.



Muriel Rogers tells of her experiences at Kozminski School.

Hyde Park Historical Society

COLLECTING AND PRESERVING HYDE PARK'S HISTORY

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This Newsletter is published by the Hyde Park Historical Society, a not-for-profit organization founded in 1975 to record, preserve, and promote public interest in the history of Hyde Park. Its headquarters, located in an 1893 restored cable car station at 5529 S. Lake Park Avenue, houses local exhibits. It is open to the public on Saturdays and Sundays from 2 until 4pm.

Web site: hydeparkhistory.org
Telephone: **HY3-1893**

President: **Ruth Knack**
Editor: **Frances S. Vandervoort**
Membership Coordinator:
Claude Weil
Designer: **Nickie Sage**

I'm 21 Now – Reflections on Life in Hyde Park

“Please call me,” implored Joan Levin. “I’m 21 now.”

So ended a delightful celebration of Hyde Park memories organized by Blackstone librarian Lala Rodgers and supported by the Hyde Park Historical Society. More than 70 history buffs crowded into the Library’s auditorium on Saturday, August 1, to share reminiscences, tributes, and reflections about living in, as local historian and educator Timuel Black described it, the only community in the country that could produce the first African-American woman senator, Carol Moseley Braun, and the first African-American President, Barack Obama.

Moderators Lala Rodgers and Timuel Black offered their own reminiscences of life in Hyde Park. Tim, born on December 7, 1918, moved with his family from Alabama to Chicago in 1919, just in time for the race riots that shook Chicago to the core. Lala spoke fondly of her life on Chicago’s south side.

State Rep. Barbara Flynn Currie came to Hyde Park in 1947 as a young girl. She graduated from St. Thomas the Apostle’s High School in 1954, and was proud to regard the Blackstone Library as HER library! Judy Roothaan came to University of Chicago in 1947 to study race relations. At that time, the Rosenwald Mansion at 49th St. and Ellis Avenue ➤



① was the headquarters of the American Council on Race Relations and the National Opinion Research Center. Arlene Rubin, who has lived in Hyde Park since the early 1960s, praised the exhibit now at the Spertus Museum about Julius Rosenwald's efforts to support education for African-Americans in the South.

Louis Sopkin, who will turn 84 in October, recalled two tarpaper shacks on the lakefront where a few individualists survived by fishing and keeping warm in winter with small coal-fired stoves. In the late 1930s, Sopkin attended Kenwood Grammar School (now



AUDREY MITCHELL

Louis Sopkin describes his experiences at Hyde Park High School

Cantor Academy), where a new kid, Felix Rosenbaum, had just arrived from Germany. Rosenbaum's stirring essay, "What America Means to Me," won first place in an Illinois competition. Sopkin described early days of integration at Hyde Park High School, where a large African-American boy, nicknamed Snowball, became his friend and protector against the anti-Semitism then afflicting the school.

Muriel Rogers, born in Hyde Park in 1926, also spoke of German-Jewish kids arriving in the 1930s. Many enrolled in Kozminski School, which she attended and where she used her familiarity with German to teach the newcomers rudiments of English, including how to find the restrooms. Later, she attended Hyde Park High School with Winston Kennedy and Harold Washington.

Leah Kadden recalled the 56th Street cablecar turn-around near where she now owns a townhouse at 56th Street and Harper Avenue. Also, she told of former Alderman Len Despres' practice of opening his office on 55th Street one evening each week so that ward residents could come in to discuss local issues.

Joe Marlin, who lives in a 1902 row house in the

5400 block of South Greenwood Avenue, described his and his wife's pre-nuptial dinner at Morton's Restaurant in 1964. He showed the audience a souvenir cocktail glass from the restaurant, and described a souvenir ashtray from the restaurant he gave to a relative who had especially enjoyed dining there. Joe spoke of a glass cover from an electric light fixture in a Green Hornet streetcar that served Cottage Grove Avenue until the mid-1950s. Joe purchased this item from a specialty shop on Navy Pier.

Bert Benade entranced the audience with a tale of his successful effort in the early 1950s to defuse a serious racial problem that had developed in the co-op building where he lived south of the Midway. Blackstone Rangers were harassing the tenants of the all-white building. Bert, then the president of the board of the co-op, decided to speak with Jeff Fort, the leader of the Rangers about how to solve the problem. Fort said that he'd like for his mother and his siblings to move into a vacant apartment in the building. Problems of harassment disappeared overnight, but white tenants were furious. A few months later, the building fell to the wrecking ball during urban renewal.

Arlene Rubin appealed to nostalgia by asking the audience to call out the names of businesses that had



KATHY HUFF

Judy Roothaan tells of her life as a student of race relations in the late 1940s

disappeared. Hesitant at first, audience members soon began a chorus of memories: Alexander's Restaurant, Bordelon's, Breslauer's, Jesselson's Fish, Hyde Park Bowling Alley, Kiddy Kicks, Hobby House Restaurant, The Eagle, Enrico's, Chances R, Model Camera, Mitzie's Flowers, and, with a big sigh, the Hyde Park Co-op.

Back to Joan Levin, who had ended the celebration

Garden Fair Celebration July 18

Rita Allen

Garden aficionados and their friends attended a fine program about flowers and those who grow them at a well-attended program celebrating the golden anniversary of the Hyde Park Garden Fair on Saturday, July 18, at the Society's Headquarters. Bert Benade introduced Bam Postell, long-time stalwart of the Garden Fair committee, who reflected upon the many others who had helped make the organization the success it is today, including Lee Botts, Helga Sinaiko, Norah Erickson, Sophie Rudin, and Molly Salmon.

The Garden Fair Committee's origin coincided with the beginning, in the late 1950s, of urban renewal and the construction of the 55th St. Shopping Center. Although there were no garden stores in the neighborhood, Hyde Park echoed the national effort toward a "greener America." Gardening became one of Hyde Park's most important leisure activities.

Early members tended to be stay-at-home moms or mothers whose children had grown. Now gardeners exist all over Hyde Park, many of whom enjoy growing new kinds of plants. In addition, gardeners come to the annual Fair from beyond Hyde Park to see what is offered for sale.

The spring Fair is the Garden Committee's major event, and is held in the 55th St. Shopping Center. This year's Fair sold about 50,000 plants gathered from 18-20 nurseries in northern Illinois and Indiana.

A love for gardening in Hyde Park has deep roots.

Lincoln the Boatman

It's no secret that your editor is an inveterate sand collector. A number of Society members have taken time from their travels to collect samples of these small-grained treasures of the Earth for my ever-growing collection. Thus, I was pleased to learn of a connection between Abraham Lincoln and sand.

In early spring, I read an article in the *Chicago Tribune*, by travel writer Josh Noel, about his experiences retracing the steps of Lincoln in central Illinois. The article showed a view of Panther Creek, which Lincoln is reputed to have crossed on horseback. In searching for this site, I managed to contact an historian knowledgeable about the region, Harry Hendrickson of Rochester, IL. He informed me that Lincoln had been closely associated with the Sangamon River of central Illinois, which passes north of Springfield on its way to

the Illinois River near Beardstown. Panther Creek is a feeder stream of the Sangamon River.

Mr. Hendrickson commented that Lincoln used to travel the Sangamon River on a flatboat. Around 1831, he got hung up on one of the sandbars of the river near New Salem. He decided to settle down in this small town. New Salem is now a state historical site, with many of the original buildings available for public view.

I plan to visit both Panther Creek and the Sangamon River to collect sand from streams that played a role in the life of Lincoln. **FSV**

Campus Tour September 20

Paul Durica, PhD candidate in English and the Humanities at the University of Chicago, will lead a tour of the University's campus on Sunday, September 20, 2009, from 2:00-3:30 pm. (Rain date Saturday, September 25, from 2:00-3:30 pm.) The tour, which will begin in the University's Reynolds Club at 5706 South University Avenue, will focus on the history of the University from its beginning in 1891 up until the early 1920s, with a major emphasis on the Harper presidency.

Paul, who is conducting in-depth research for this tour, will give an extensive historical talk and will be prepared to answer questions along the way.

New Society Members

The Historical Society welcomes the following new members: Paul Bruce, Robert Miller, and Gabriel Piemonte.

Obituary

Fred Blum, teacher, scholar, and raconteur died September 15, 2008. For 35 years, Fred was a professor of urban geography at Chicago State University, where he helped establish the teachers' union. Fred was an early and energetic advocate for the preservation of Promontory Point. Donations (by check) in Fred's memory may be sent to Hyde Park Historical Society/Promontory Point Conservancy, 5529 South Lake Park Avenue, Chicago, IL 60637.

The following individuals have made contributions in Fred's name: Gary Ossewaarde, Irene Patner, Rita Picken, Richard J. Shaker, and Francis and Lorna Strauss.

A Trip to The Jazz Age

Not long ago, while prowling the stacks of Regenstein Library, Neil Harris, University of Chicago Professor Emeritus of History and Art History, came across several plainly-bound volumes of *The Chicagoan*, a little-known magazine from the 1920s and 1930s. His discovery led to an informative and beautifully illustrated book, *The Chicagoan: A Lost Magazine of the Jazz Age*, published by the University



Neil Harris tells of his discovery of *The Chicagoan*.

of Chicago Press in 2008. On June 14, 2009, Harris enthralled an audience of approximately 35 individuals gathered at HPHS Headquarters with a vivid presentation about his book and the Jazz Age, the years between the end of WWI in 1918 and the rise of the Great Depression in 1930.

During the 1920s, Chicago was the fourth most populous city in the world behind London, New York City, and Berlin. It was widely dismissed as a frontier city and haven for crime and dirty politics, and certainly was no place for culture and creativity. *The Chicagoan*, whose first issue appeared on June 14, 1926, was modeled after *The New Yorker*, which had appeared a year earlier. It went far in dispelling the myth that Chicago was a cultural wasteland.

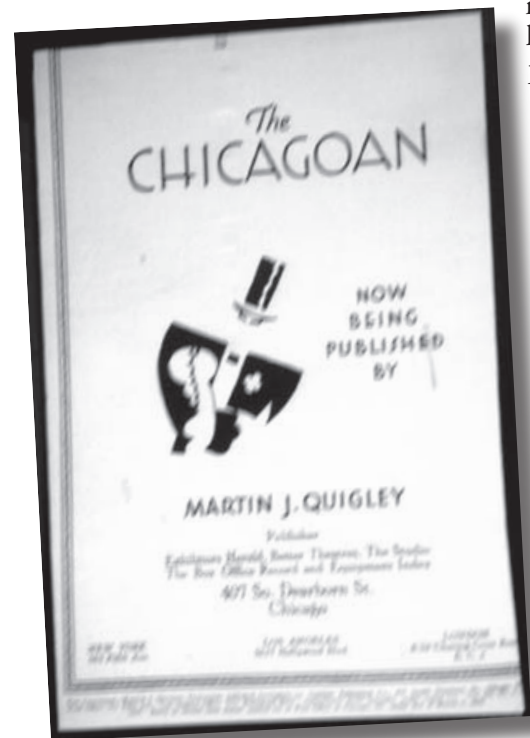
The stunning front covers of this magazine were designed by such well-known Chicago artists as A. R. Katz (known widely as Sandor), Nat Karson,



Jack Cella of the Seminary Coop Book Store and Joan Staples admire Neil Harris's new book.

and Gene Markey. Authors – humorists, poets, and other wordsmiths all contributed their talents to this celebration of the Windy City.

The magazine ceased publication in 1935 for reasons that are not entirely clear. After the 1933 *Century of Progress* fair, there seemed to be little purpose in its continuation, even though 20,000 readers read it every



month. The last issue was published in April, 1935.

Thanks to Neil Harris, *The Chicagoan* is no longer consigned to oblivion. **FSV**

Another Museum of Science and Industry Adventure

Paul G. Bruce

The Summer issue of Hyde Park History contained an article by Bill Hickman about his early experiences at the Museum of Science and Industry. Long-time Hyde Parker Paul G. Bruce has sent us this account of his own experiences.



Lala Rodgers and Stephanie Franklin enjoy the program of reminiscences

by announcing that she is now 21. She told the rest of her story. As a little girl, she often strolled with her parents on Promontory Point. One day, a man approached her and handed her a nickel. "Call me when you turn 21," the man instructed. "So," said Joan, "if you're out there in the audience, I'm 21 now. Please call me."

Other participants in this happy event included Olive Flowers, Jean Fuhrman, and Robin Kaufman. **FSV**

UPCOMING EVENTS

Saturday, September 20, 2009

Tour of the University of Chicago campus. See article, "Campus Tour."

Saturday, November 7, 2009

Tour of the Special Collections Research Center of the Regenstein Library of the University of Chicago. Details will be announced at a later date.

Sunday, December 6, 2009

Holiday party at the Headquarters

The recent memoir about the Museum of Science and Industry brought back memories about a similar adventure. We, too, started at the main entrance and, spread-eagled against the wall, made our way along the ledge. Our faces were to the wall as it kept you from looking at the drop that awaited you if you fell from the ledge. Our goal was to reach the Porch of the Maidens. I still remember the feeling of success I felt as I stood close to these giant figures that dwarfed me and gazed into their faces. We left the easy way—jumping down from the porch to the grass. This was easy for a boy who was used to leaping into his backyard from the landing of the stairs between the first and second floor.

I remember once riding my bicycle down the grand staircase at the entrance. Once started, there was no turning back. One could only hang onto the handlebars for dear life and hope to avoid the spill that would surely result in a cracked skull. It was an experience I never dared to repeat.

My first trip to the Museum of Science and Industry was a school trip about 1935 or 1936. Parochial schools didn't take many field trips so this was a rare experience for us. The great hall presented a far different appearance than it does today. White painted walls rose to the ceiling where the rafters were still visible. Bright light streamed in from above. And the coal mine elevator dominated the whole space. The stairwells had not yet been squared off and the stairway to the basement restrooms, made of metal about four feet wide, clung to the wall as it spiraled down, leaving a huge void in the center that was a little bit scary.

The trip to the Museum from my home at 59th St. and Michigan was a long one, usually made on foot along the Midway. On a number of occasions, we made the trip on roller skates—the old-fashioned kind that could be detached from your shoes and checked at the front door of the Museum. **HPH**

The Chicago Metro History Fair Comes to Hyde Park

Kathy Huff

On Saturday, May 30, five high school student projects from the Spring 2009 Chicago Metro History Fair were presented to a capacity crowd at the Society's Headquarters. Event organizer Kathy Huff introduced Timuel Black, who spoke to the gathering about his experiences as a young African-American growing up in Bronzeville during the Depression. He treated the audience to several of his most memorable stories, including the story of his service in the U.S. Army during World War II under Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower. He also recounted that, even though President Harry S. Truman had desegregated the U.S. Armed Forces, he and other black veterans returning from service were faced with the discriminatory real estate practices still prevalent in Chicago.

The program was highlighted by two groups of students who had been selected as winners of the 2009 Hyde Park Historical Society's award for the best projects related to Hyde Park Township. These awards were made possible by a generous donation from the Stein family and the Polk Brothers Foundation. The winning projects are: *Frederick Law Olmsted and the Columbian Exposition: Building Chicago*, prepared by Greg Fleytlikh, Dean Kazamias, Joe Kosir & Tyler Pazik of Niles West High School, and *Hansberry Court Case*, prepared by Breanna Stewart & Christopher Williams of Morgan Park High School.

Carefully prepared DVDs enhanced two of the projects. Other projects consisted of detailed large panel exhibits and research papers. Niles West's winners, Greg Fleytlikh and Joe Kosir, showed their DVD about Frederick Law Olmsted and answered questions. The second DVD: *Julius Rosenwald: A Philanthropist*, was presented by four young women from Lincoln Park High School in Chicago, Kristina Hrvojevic, Nicole Jackowski, Camila Navartete & Daney Ramirez.

Breanna Stewart and Christopher Williams' project about the landmark *Supreme Court Case: Hansberry vs. Lee* (1940), described the significance of this case in removing the discriminatory real estate practices described earlier by Timuel Black. Steven Mullooly, their history teacher, praised his students' achievement, especially considering that they were high school freshmen competing against much older students from the Chicago area.

Double Duo: Timuel Black and Martin Luther

King, was presented by Ciarra Benton & Michael Conner of Bronzeville Scholastic Academy. This work was awarded the Timuel Black Award for the best 2009 Chicago Metro History Fair project about African-American history. Tim Black praised this particular exhibit, indicating that he was a graduate of DuSable High School of which Bronzeville Scholastic Academy is now a part.



Hyde Park Historical Society Award winners Greg Fleytlikh and Joe Kosir from Niles West High School. Dean Kazamias and Tyler Pazik, co-winners, were not able to attend.



Breanna Stewart and Christopher Williams from Morgan Park High School describe the Hansberry Court Case.

Kristin Machczynski, the lead teacher for this project, spoke enthusiastically about working with these two students, especially since it was the first time that she, the students, and the school had embarked on a project for the Chicago Metro History Fair. Such high

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PETER CREEL



Timuel Black Award winners Michael Conner, Ciarra Benton, and teacher Kristin Machczynski from Bronzeville Scholastic Institute



Timuel Black reflects upon History Fair projects.

standards were set by the pair that Ms. Machczynski plans to enter more students' projects in the History Fair next year.

The final student project, *George Pullman: The Unintentional Results of Misguided Oppression*, was researched and written by a Hyde Parker, Jerome Molasky, who attends Payton College Prep High School on Chicago's near north side. HPHS board member, Noël Brusman, introduced the paper for Jerome, who was not able to attend the program. Exhibits and papers will be on display at the HPHS headquarters during the summer.

At the end of the program, Kathy Huff recognized the new executive director of the Chicago Metro History Education Center, Frank Valadez, who expressed his appreciation to the HPHS for developing

a program that honors History Fair finalists and gives them the opportunity to present their projects to a larger audience than teachers and judges. He noted that the students' participation in the May HPHS program would provide an added bonus to their college applications.

Leon Despres' Role with the Hyde Park Historical Society

Clyde Watkins

Len Despres was an early and committed member of our board. In fact, Len was part of the very first "convening session" of the Historical Society, which we held in the family room (or whatever it is they call it there) at St. Thomas church. A U-High and U. of C. classmate of mine named Tom Jensen and I decided to see what sort of community interest there would be in what we then thought of as a "Historical League of Hyde Park – Kenwood." We made up a flyer and distributed it all over Hyde Park, and to our delight, a couple of hundred people showed up! One was Len, who uttered his familiar refrain, "What's past is prologue."

When it came time to raise the funds for the renovation of our headquarters building, we were committed to broad local participation, so we issued "charter memberships" at \$100 each. Len was one of the first to sign up. (Truth be told, we had to rely on some downtown foundations with Hyde Park connections – mostly through Jean Block – to get the full \$40,000 together to restore the building. Seems impossible, doesn't it? But did you ever see it before the Society took charge of it?)

Over the years, Len played an important and visible role in moving the Society forward – under the careful scrutiny of his equally committed wife, Marian – from emceeing the annual dinner to making occasional timely phone calls on our behalf. It was fascinating working with him in the context of the Hyde Park Historical Society, because we all knew that we were in the presence of an important living piece of Hyde Park history, right in our midst. He was the ultimate exemplar of what the community respects and treasures – an individual of commitment, principle, high dudgeon, and no small amount of Don Quixote-ism. He remains a role model for us all. **HPH**