



THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF OAK PARK & RIVER FOREST

HISTORY MATTERS

FALL 2023

OPRFMUSEUM.ORG

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Celebrate With Us at Two Special Events

Everyone is invited to celebrate the season at OPRF Museum's Holiday Open House, Saturday, November 25 from 1 to 5 p.m.

An event designed for the whole family, the Open House will include light refreshments, historical games and toys for the kids, and a display of holiday-themed items from the Museum's collection. The Open House is also a great opportunity to check out our new exhibit *Ever-Changing, Yet the Same: OPRF High School at 150*. (See story on page 2.) The exhibit features opportunities to learn about some of the fascinating stories and accomplished graduates of the high school and to leave some of your memories behind.

Since the Open House coincides with Small Business Saturday, this is also a chance to visit our Museum Shop for special sales on unusual gifts and mementos with a special Oak Park and River Forest flavor. Find gifts for family and friends or for yourself!

This event is free to everyone, so bring your family and friends and celebrate the holidays at OPRF Museum! And while you are here, consider purchasing a gift membership for a friend or family member who will enjoy the gift of history and community all year long in 2024.



A special "Members Only" event on December 1 will mark the 125th anniversary of our building and say "Thank You" to our members

On Friday, December 1, join us at Oak Park River Forest Museum where we will party like it's 1898. We'll celebrate with two kinds of chili and fixings, cornbread, beverages, sweets, and music performed by a mandolin duet! The event kicks off at 6:30 p.m., with brief remarks at 7:15.

All members of The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest are invited to this special members-only appreciation event that will mark both the 125th anniversary of Cicero Fire House No. 2 and the 15th anniversary since our building was designated an Oak Park Landmark in 2008.

The entertainment on December 1, 2023, will be a mandolin duet, inspired by the December 6, 1898, dedication party or "opening exercises" described that week in the *Oak Park Times*: "The firemen and their guests then repaired to the engine room, whose floors were occupied with three long tables, tastefully spread and decorated with flowers....During the dinner, music was furnished by a mandolin club."

Since this anniversary event is an exclusive thank you to our members, please join us or renew your membership today! Please RSVP and join, renew, or check the status of your membership by November 28 via oprfmuseum.org, by calling 708-848-6755, or emailing oprfhistormatters@sbcglobal.net.

Mark your calendar and don't miss the chance to celebrate our unique and beautiful two-story brick landmark, which was described in December 1898 "as handsome a fire building as there is in Cook County."



Headline from The Oak Park Times, December 8, 1898

Ever Changing, Yet the Same: OPRF High School at 150 New Exhibit Celebrating School's Sesquicentennial Is Now Open



OPRF Museum President Fran Knechel and Don Vogel, co-chair of the Sesquicentennial Steering Committee and retired OPRFHS administrator, cut the ribbon to officially open our exhibit. Also pictured are school board members Tom Cofsky and Fred Arkin, OPRFHS Superintendent Greg Johnson, and OPRF Museum Executive Director Frank Lipo.

OPRF Museum's newest exhibit, *Ever Changing, Yet the Same: OPRF High School at 150*, celebrating the sesquicentennial of our villages' high school, had its grand opening on October 4th. The exhibit will run through 2025.

You can visit our exhibit during regular museum hours, Wednesday through Saturday from 1 to 5 p.m. Go to oprfmuseum.org/plan-your-visit for additional information or to arrange a group visit or reunion event at the museum. And in the meantime, enjoy these photos of a few examples of what you will see when you visit our exhibit.



A vintage card catalog cabinet from the OPRFHS library contains index cards with photos and brief biographies of alumni, both famous and lesser-known. We know our list of notable alumni is incomplete and we welcome your suggestions of who else we should add!



School jackets, uniforms, and T-shirts from across the decades are just a few of the myriad pieces of OPRFHS memorabilia on display.

High School Website Lists Special Events, Updates During Year-Long Celebration

Our exhibit is just part of the community-wide celebration of this historic anniversary. The high school's Sesquicentennial Steering Committee has planned special events throughout the school year. To learn more about these special events, visit the high school's webpage dedicated to the 150th anniversary at oprfhhs.org/about/150th-anniversary or scan this QR code.



Copies of *Tabula*, the High School's yearbook are available for visitors to leaf through. We even have a limited number of extra copies for select years that are available for purchase.

A Message from Fran Knechel, New President of OPRF Museum

As OPRF Museum's new president, it feels good to come on board during the opening of the exhibit that celebrates the 150th anniversary of Oak Park River Forest High School's founding. It is wonderful



Fran Knechel

that Anna Miller, a high school senior at OPRFHS, helped create the exhibit.

In my new role, I will work to continue building ties between our Oak Park and River Forest schools and the Museum because history is so much a part of who we are individually and as a community.

During my twenties, I taught history to high schoolers in New York and St. Louis. I watched my students enjoy their learning experiences. Last December, I had the opportunity to observe a group of Beye Elementary School second graders enjoy a transatlantic voyage. These students gathered around Gerda Lundgren's trunk on the first floor of Oak Park River Forest Museum. After learning about the 17-year-old girl who packed that trunk to travel from Sweden to Oak Park in 1909, I asked the students to imagine what they would pack for a big move. Their answers included stuffed animals, books, video games, and a white noise machine to help them sleep. This activity helped the students build a historical connection to Gerda's move to Oak Park.

For those of us past school age, there are many ways Oak Park River Forest Museum supports lifelong learning. It is an intergenerational space. Through exhibits, programs, book discussions, and research opportunities we can expand our understanding of our community and get to know our neighbors better. Please join me in our mission to inspire, engage, and educate residents of and visitors to Oak Park, River Forest, and the vicinity by inviting friends to the Museum. I am ready to continue learning about our community through your memories and stories.



Two New Part-Time Employees Join the OPRF Museum Team

We are pleased to announce the addition of two part-time employees to the Museum staff.

MyLeah Marks, our new Administrative Assistant, joined our staff during the summer. She works Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, welcoming visitors, answering their questions about the museum, and handling admissions, gift sales, and membership registrations. She also assists with member and donor correspondence as well as other clerical tasks.



MyLeah Marks

Bibliophile, history enthusiast, and Beatles fan, MyLeah is passionate about literature, history, music and movies. She is currently enrolled at Dominican University where she is a Master of Library and Information Science student.

As a Chicago native, MyLeah loved visiting Oak Park while growing up, so she finds working in a place that offers so much history about Oak Park to be a rewarding learning experience.

Cheri Bentrup began working for the Historical Society in August. As Coordinator of Community Outreach, Cheri is ramping up our presence on social media (check us out on Facebook and Instagram) and is writing much of our recent marketing material. She is also helping to develop ongoing relations with local schools, churches, and community organizations.



Cheri Bentrup

She has more than 20 years of experience in community journalism, most recently as an editor for the *Oak Leaves*. She lives in Oak Park where she and her husband raised three children. She has a bachelor's degree in mass communications (journalism) from Illinois State University, Normal.

Connie Henderson-Damon Made History Fun!

by Nancy Lynn, OPRF Museum Board Member

Whether it was dressing up as Lady Liberty to march in the Fourth of July parade or donning a dalmatian costume to help raise funds for a new museum in an old firehouse, Connie Henderson-Damon knew how to put fun into history. Even though cancer claimed her life in 2018, Connie continues to have an impact on history—and to make it fun for others, thanks to a generous memorial contribution by her husband Chris and their daughter Laura.

Connie and Chris Damon moved to Oak Park in the late 1980s, and quickly became active in civic activities throughout the Village: at their church, First United; at the Oak Park Public Library; and with the OPRF Historical Society, among other interests. Chris stepped up to co-chair the Citizens Committee for the current Oak Park Public Library building, which opened in 2003. Connie was a dedicated supporter of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest, and a board member for nearly a decade.

"We were neighbors, and we were all history buffs," said longtime Museum board member and past president Peggy Tuck Sinko, "so getting Connie involved with the Historical Society was easy. She was a huge booster of our programs and events. She was front and center at Cemetery and House Walks, fundraisers, and she costumed up every year to walk in the Memorial Day and July 4 parades. She knew it was important to put the fun in local history!"

Connie Henderson-Damon also embraced the challenges facing the Historical Society. When she joined the Board in 2009, the Society was looking for a new home, having outgrown its Pleasant Home quarters. Peggy recalls that just as Connie knew how to put the fun in all she did, she was fiercely

committed to the Historical Society's future. Connie saw the selection of the Firehouse as visionary and was delighted to know that the Society would have a home of its own to display the historic artifacts and archives that had long been hidden in boxes.

It was our good fortune that Chris and Connie were able to attend the grand opening of the new

History Museum together in the fall of 2017. Sadly, Connie passed away in March 2018. But a life insurance policy provided the means for Chris and Laura to make a gift in 2018 to help support the Society's expanded programming in the restored Oak Park Firehouse at 129 Lake Street, a transformative project that Connie was deeply involved in.

A founding member of the Philander Barclay Society, which honors annual donors of \$1,000 or more, Chris Damon continues to support the Historical Society.

"During the years we are raising our families, we worry about how to manage everything financially—mortgages, college tuitions, healthcare costs—and still find a way to be generous to organizations like the Historical Society," Damon

said.

"I'm no expert, but in retirement, I have learned about ways to give besides writing a check. For example, it's possible to allocate a portion of required distributions from a personal IRA to the Historical Society. There are a few simple steps to take [see box on next page] to meet a December 31 transfer deadline each year.

"I see great things ahead for our History Museum. Most communities don't have a museum of their own. I am fortunate that Connie and I have played a part in its success, today and into the future."



Connie, shown here dressed as a suffragist, was always ready to "lead the parade" to promote the Historical Society, both figuratively and literally.



How to Use Your IRA to Make a Tax-Wise Gift to the Historical Society

Donating all or part of the annual Required Minimum Distribution from your IRA can be an easy and smart way to support a not-for-profit organization like The Historical Society of Oak Park & River Forest. Known as a Qualified Charitable Contribution, this strategy could potentially reduce your tax burden, but there are rules you should be aware of.

- You must be 70 ½ or older.
- The gift must be made directly from your IRA to the Historical Society.
- Your IRA administrator makes the transfer at your direction.
- The transfer must be made no later than December 31 of the current tax year.

Other helpful information:

- Your gift counts towards your mandatory distribution.
- Your gift is NOT added to your taxable income.
- Gifts from 401(k), 403(b), and 457 plans are not permitted. However, it may be possible to roll funds from one of these plans into an IRA, and then make a gift. Talk with your financial advisor.
- Before making any withdrawal, be sure to consult your IRA plan administrator, or a trusted financial advisor.
- And please notify the Historical Society (708-848-6755) of your transfer. Your IRA administrator may not always identify you as the donor.

Historical Society Receives Grant from Arts Council

In September, the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest was awarded a \$2,500 grant from the Oak Park Area Arts Council to be used for general operating expenses of OPRF Museum.

Founded by a group of local artists in 1974 as the Civic Arts Council of Oak Park, the Oak Park Area Arts Council now serves the villages of River Forest, Forest Park, and Oak Park. OPAAC's regranting program, using funds from the Illinois Arts Council, is one of the largest local arts council regranting programs in the state of Illinois.

The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest is partially funded by the Oak Park Area Arts Council, in partnership with the Village of Oak Park, the Illinois Arts Council Agency, and the National Endowment for the Arts.



History Matters

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We welcome your suggestions and comments.
Please email us at: oprhistorymatters@sbcglobal.net

A Very Capable All-Round Man of the Building Arts

by James J. Grogan, OPRF Museum Board Member

Many homes and office buildings in Oak Park and River Forest reflect the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and other Prairie School architects. One of them, William Gray Purcell, found himself compelled to acknowledge how much fellow architect Roy Hotchkiss contributed to local architecture. Purcell said: "Oak Park and Northern Illinois are filled with Hotchkiss buildings ... He was a better man than he ever received credit for." Purcell estimated that Hotchkiss designed over 300 buildings between 1895 and 1930.

Hotchkiss was born in Richmond, Indiana, on August 23, 1877. He was the son of Zeroy Pizort Hotchkiss, a Civil War veteran, and Emma Almira Rhodes. When Hotchkiss was about seven years old, the family moved to Oak Park.

Upon settling in Oak Park, Hotchkiss attended public school until high school. After that, he received no additional formal education. As a teenager, he served as an apprentice to local architect Eben E. Roberts. When Hotchkiss joined the firm in 1893 or 1894, Roberts had a small architectural office located at the corner of Madison Street and Oak Park Avenue.

At the time he hired Hotchkiss, Roberts marketed himself as being able to not only design buildings, but also promoted "special designs for grill work, mantles, and sideboards." It is likely that Hotchkiss began his design career working on these types of interior ornamentation projects.

Hotchkiss proved to be a talented and innovative designer who, as the firm grew markedly, became Roberts's chief draftsman. Roberts came to rely on Hotchkiss's ever-expanding talent as a designer.

Of Hotchkiss, Purcell also wrote that he was Roberts's "[C]hief designer and a very capable all-round man of the building arts ... There was no huckstering egotism about his designing, no show-off, but there was plenty of self-confidence ... In producing his forms and detail 'from-his-head,' they just flowed out and around his projects."

Hotchkiss fully embraced the Prairie School spirit, leaving a significant legacy of progressive residential architecture in Oak Park and River Forest. As Roberts' practice grew, he devoted himself increasingly to the business side of the office and Chief Draftsman Roy Hotchkiss was likely the person most responsible for design in the Roberts studio.

In mid-1909, Hotchkiss successfully sat for the Illinois architectural examination and became licensed to practice. As a result, Roberts no longer needed to approve and physically seal any of his design plans. Hotchkiss thus had considerable independent authority within the firm although he remained loyal to Roberts. Hotchkiss continued to do extensive work for Roberts but since he was officially an employee, his work was attributed to Roberts. Thus, the true depth and extent of Hotchkiss's design work might never be known. One telling example of his relative anonymity in architectural history might be his own small bungalow at 516 S. Euclid. Although he designed the home in 1914, the building permit lists Roberts as the architect of record.

Hotchkiss left Roberts's employ in late 1919 or early 1920 when Roberts decided to partner with his son, Elmer. Subsequently, Hotchkiss opened his first office in the old Cicero Gas Company building at



Roy Hotchkiss (right) with brother, Con, and father, Zeroy, c. 1905

(Continued on page 7)


Hotchkiss (Continued from page 6)

115 N. Oak Park Avenue. Later, he worked and lived in the Masonic Temple Building, now known as Scoville Square at 137 N. Oak Park Avenue. In addition to design work, he also served as president of the Acorn Savings & Loan, Oak Park's first savings and loan which was founded in 1923. The bank closed during the Great Depression.

Throughout his independent practice, Hotchkiss designed numerous homes, churches, large apartment buildings, schools and commercial buildings throughout Cook, DuPage and Grundy Counties. He also did extensive remodeling work such as revamping the retail frontages of Roberts's Scoville Block One additions on Lake Street.

During the 1920s, he built several large single-family masonry clad homes throughout the area that feature many Progressive Era design elements. However, in response to the desires of clients, he began designing in a variety of then-popular styles, including the collegiate Gothic as is seen in his Postlewait Village Chapel at 720 Lake Street (1920) and the luxury apartment building at 333 South Oak Park Avenue (1929). The structure that he is best known for is his 1929 Art Deco-style Medical Arts Building at 715 Lake Street.

Toward the end of his professional years, Hotchkiss practiced with architectural engineer Samuel E. Bird who was born in England. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, Hotchkiss became crippled and had difficulty walking. As a result, he no longer supervised onsite work and relied on Bird to handle tasks outside the office. Instead, Hotchkiss spent all his time hunched over his drafting board. After all, design work was his first and biggest professional love. The last known structure that the pair worked on was the Church of the Good Shepherd in 1940 at Randolph Street and East Avenue.

Hotchkiss married in 1912. His wife, Lena Virginia Latham, died in 1928 at age 54. The couple had no children. Hotchkiss passed away on June 14, 1945 at age 67. Appropriately, his funeral service was held at the Postlewait Funeral Chapel he designed, directly across the street from what many view as his masterpiece, the Medical Arts Building. He and Lena are buried in Forest Home Cemetery in Forest Park. 

The Versatility of Roy J. Hotchkiss

Below are photos of just a few of the well-known buildings in Oak Park designed by Roy Hotchkiss. Together, they illustrate the versatility and flexibility of an architect whose work is often overlooked.



*The Medical Arts Building
715 Lake St. (1929)*



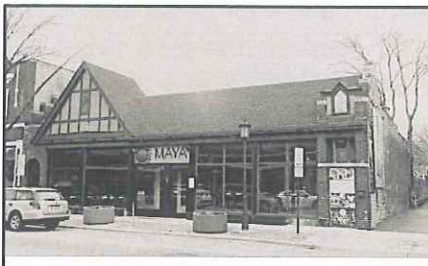
*225 Harrison St., home of
Trattoria 225 Restaurant (1928)*



*Postlewait Village Chapel
720 Lake St. (1920)*



*Good Shepherd Lutheran Church,
611 Randolph St. (1940)*



*140 S. Oak Park Ave., home of
Maya del Sol Restaurant (1925)*



*333 S. Oak Park
Apartments (1929)*



*Roy J. Hotchkiss House, 516 S.
Euclid Ave., designed while
working for E E Roberts (1914)*



*Owen H. Jones House,
639 S. Elmwood Ave. (1920)*

From Oak Park & River Forest High School to "The Poet of Noir"

by Kurt Etchingham, Newsletter Editor

"Fools," said my muse to me, "look unto my heart and write!"

Seventeen-year-old Kenneth Fearing chose this quote from Sir Philip Sidney (slightly misquoted!) to caption his senior photo in the 1920 *Tabula*, the yearbook of Oak Park and River Forest High School. It was a prescient choice. Fearing made writing his career. It was virtually all he did for the rest of his life. That same year, his OPRFHS classmates voted him both the Wittiest Boy and the Class Pessimist. Those titles, too, proved apropos.

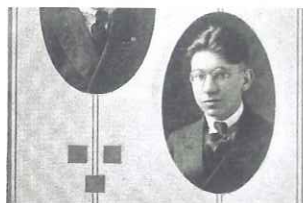
Scholarship Contest, History (4).

"Dares to be true and silently takes his part."

KENNETH FEARING

Class Day Speaker (4); Trapeze Staff (3) (4); Athletic Association (4); Boys' High School Club (4); Trapeze Editor (4); Hanna Club (4); Burke Club (4).

"Fools," said my muse to me. "Look unto my heart and write."



From the 1920 *Tabula* yearbook of Oak Park and River Forest High School

Kenneth Fearing was born in Oak Park on July 28, 1902, to Harry L. Fearing and Olive E. Flexner. His father was a corporate attorney who served as Oak Park's Village Attorney for several years. Kenneth was born about eleven months after his parents married. He was barely a year old when they divorced.

He was soon estranged from his mother. She moved to San Francisco not long after the divorce and lived the rest of her life on the West Coast and in the Philippines. Though she remarried at least twice, she never had any other children and never showed any interest in being a mother. Years later Fearing noted that, although they saw each other on occasion, his only real connection to his mother was the check she sent him every month.



This 1935 portrait of Fearing by artist and close friend Alice Neel hangs in the Museum of Modern Art in New York City.

After the divorce, Harry Fearing bought a two-flat at 622 N. East Avenue. He lived in one unit while Harry's unmarried sister, Eva, lived in the other. Eva became Kenneth's surrogate mother. After Harry Fearing remarried and started a family with his second wife, Kenneth lived exclusively with his Aunt Eva. While

never completely estranged from his father or his half-siblings, neither did he feel particularly close to them.

Fearing attended University of Illinois for three semesters before transferring to University of Wisconsin. In his senior year at Wisconsin, he was named editor of the University literary magazine, but his editorship was short-lived. The University administration removed him from the job, decrying some of the material he chose to publish as too modernist and too salacious.

Fearing moved to New York City late in 1924 to pursue a career as a poet. His surrogate mother, Aunt Eva, had died the year before. There was nothing left tying him to Oak Park.

He struggled in New York at first, but scraped by on part-time jobs and free-lance writing assignments. While poetry was his first love, he soon realized that poetry alone was never going to pay his bills. He began knocking out short stories under several pseudonyms for trashy pulp magazines with names like *Snappy Stories*, *Tattle Tales*, and *Spicy Detective*. Writing noir novels and short stories proved to be his primary source of income for the next 25 years.



Fearing in the mid-1940s

By 1927 he was gaining attention as a poet. While he was still churning out stories under pen names to support himself, his poetry appeared regularly in magazines like *Poetry* and *The New Yorker*. In the 1930s he received two Guggenheim Fellowships for poetry. Critics hailed him with sobriquets like "The Proletarian Poet" and "The Poet of Noir." Sadly, he earned another nickname that was as cruel as it was accurate: "The Drunken Poet." Alcoholism dogged Fearing his entire adult life. Though he tried to regain sobriety several times, it never lasted. His alcohol addiction destroyed both his marriages and damaged his relationship with his only child, Bruce.

Despite the power and fierceness of his verse and the edgy aggressiveness of his prose, those closest to him usually described Fearing as shy, quiet, and always courteous and polite. "Courtly" was a term often


used to describe his manner. While his social circle was clearly on the left end of the political spectrum, Fearing himself was not a political person. In response to questions for a profile being written about him in the mid-'40s, he said, "I will suffer fools, though not gladly, but I can't endure stuffed shirts. Political convictions [are] a mystery to me. I voted for LaFollette in 1924... and passed on most of the other dates." When subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1950, he was asked if he was a Communist. His terse response: "Not yet!"

Fearing published seven volumes of poetry during his life, as well as eight novels under his own name. (There is no accurate inventory of all his writings under pen names.) One of those novels, *The Big Clock*, was published by Harcourt Brace in 1946, drawing praise from writers like Dashiell Hammett, Raymond Chandler, and Jacques Barzun. It became a best seller. Paramount Pictures bought the rights, turning it into a hit 1948 movie starring Ray Milland, Charles Laughton, and Maureen O'Sullivan.

Financial success had finally come to Kenneth Fearing. *The Big Clock* netted him over \$60,000, the equivalent of around three-quarters of a million today. Tragically, though, when a close friend asked him what that financial success meant to him, his response was, "It means I can start drinking earlier in the day."

Alcohol destroyed Fearing's life and his career. After 1950 he wrote very little poetry. His noir fiction career dried up, too. He worked briefly as writer and editor of *Newsweek* magazine's "Books" column from 1952 to 1954, the first regular full-time job he ever had. He ended his working life writing and editing press releases for the Muscular Dystrophy Association.

Early in 1961, Fearing was diagnosed with lung cancer. He was already in declining health, suffering from liver disease. Decades of chain smoking and hard drinking had caught up with him. He died four months later, 32 days short of his 59th birthday.

He is buried in Forest Home Cemetery. In an error that Fearing would no doubt have found darkly humorous, the year of birth inscribed on his tombstone says 1901, even though his birth certificate, a birth announcement in *Oak Leaves*, and other legal documents prove that the correct year was 1902. 

Below is one of Kenneth Fearing's poems. The last line is also the epitaph on his gravestone. Please visit your local library or bookstore to find more works by this remarkable but lesser-known poet.

REQUIEM

Will they stop,
Will they stand there for a moment,
perhaps before some shop where you have gone so
many times
(Stand with the same blue sky above them and the
stones, so often walked, beneath)
Will it be a day like this--
As though there could be such a day again--
And will their own concerns still be about
the same,
And will the feeling still be this that you have felt so
many times,
Will they meet and stop and speak, one perplexed
and one aloof,
Saying: Have you heard,
Have you heard,
Have you heard about the death?
Yes, choosing the words, tragic, yes, a shock,
One who had so much of this, they will say, a life so
filled with that,
Then will one say that the days are growing crisp
again, the other that the leaves are turning,
And will they say good-bye, good-bye, you must look
me up sometime, good-bye,
Then turn and go, each of them thinking, and yet,
and yet,
Each feeling, if it were I, instead, would that be all,
Each wondering, suddenly alone, if that is all, in fact--
And will that be all?
On a day like this, with motors streaming through the
fresh parks, the streets alive with casual people,
And everywhere, on all of it, the brightness of the
sun.

The inscription on
Kenneth Fearing's
headstone in Forest
Home Cemetery



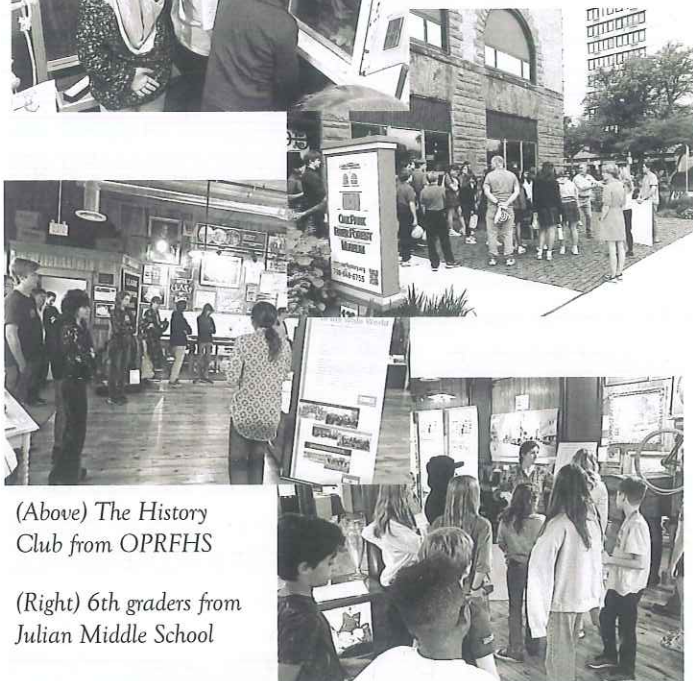
School Field Trips to OPRF Museum Are Steadily Increasing

This fall, OPRF Museum has hosted a flurry of school field trips. Shown here are scenes of our visits from 8th graders from Visitation Catholic School in Elmhurst, students from Seed Montessori School in Oak Park, 6th graders from Percy Julian Middle School, and members of OPRF High School's History Club.



(Left) Students from Seed Montessori School

(Below) Class from Visitation Catholic School in Elmhurst



(Above) The History Club from OPRFHS

(Right) 6th graders from Julian Middle School

Oak Park River Forest Museum aims to be a community resource for students, parents, and teachers. We provide a unique opportunity to learn about Oak Park and River Forest history in the classroom, at home, and at the museum! If you are an educator interested in learning how our exhibits can enhance your lesson plans, please visit our website at oprfmuseum.org/teacher-tools to see how. If you would like to plan a future field trip for your class, please call us at (708) 848-6755.

New Interpretive Sign on Lake Street Tells Story of Our Building and Museum

In September we unveiled a new interpretive sign in front of Oak Park River Forest Museum. The sign shares the history of our building with visitors and passersby and tells them what we do here now. It also invites them to get involved.



Members of the Barclay Society attended the unveiling on September 14

The plaque was created to match the existing tourism signs put up by the Village of Oak Park at Unity Temple, Pleasant Home and other sites around Oak Park. Though that program is no longer funded by the village, the support of our Philander Barclay Society donors group made the sign possible.

The Philander Barclay Society consists of generous donors who contribute \$1,000 or more per year to OPRF Museum. If you are interested in joining the Barclay Society but don't wish to make a lump sum contribution, please contact us to learn how you can set up automatic monthly or quarterly donations.

And be sure to stop and see our new sign next time you pass by OPRF Museum!

(Right) The new sign in front of OPRF Museum gives passersby a brief history of the building and its renovation.

OPRF Museum From 19th Century Firehouse to 21st Century Museum

Oak Park River Forest Museum opened in this building in 2017 as the new home of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest after the organization raised more than \$1 million in private donations to bring new life to this vacant and deteriorated Oak Park Landmark, designated in 2008.

Built as a firehouse in 1895 by Cicero Township, which then encompassed today's Oak Park, Berwyn, Cicero, and Chicago's Austin neighborhood, it pre-dates the incorporation of the Village of Oak Park in 1902. Oak Park broke away from old Cicero Township along with Berwyn in 1905 after the Austin area had been annexed to Chicago in 1889 by voters in a referendum.

Oak Park architect William Van Kester designed this two-story brick and stone structure in the popular Richardson Romanesque style, often used in public buildings and meant to convey a sense of solidity and permanence with its use of multi-colored stone and brick, arched windows, and decorative corbels.

The building remained a firehouse until 1916 and then was remodeled for the use of the municipal water department and other public works purposes. Later, the village health department used the building as did the Human Relations Commission, now the Community Relations Commission. The second floor included a social hall for community use from 1899 until a 1950s office conversion. Called Gail Hall in honor of Civil War veteran, the space was the home to meetings of local veterans groups, clubs and churches, and was used as a polling place.

The Historical Society's 2015-17 renovation and restoration of the building included uncovering and restoring original wood floors, ceilings and walls on the first floor, re-draming the fire pole between floors. A fire sprinkler system was installed for the first time, as was all new electrical, plumbing and alarm systems. A new environmentally friendly geothermal heating and cooling system was installed. It included the drilling of three, 100-foot-deep wells beneath today's brick driveway that reverts the early 20th century appearance of the front of the building. Future plans include the installation of an elevator and exterior work to re-create the original appearance of windows and doors as shown in these photographs.

Visitors are welcome to tour OPRF Museum's exhibits and partially restored 1895 interior during regular open hours, which are listed on the building or available via a QR code below linking to oprfmuseum.org. Anyone interested in finding out more about the history of Oak Park and River Forest, wanting to get involved, or seeking an appointment to do research also may call 708-848-6755.

The building is owned by the Village of Oak Park and operated through a long-term lease agreement with the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest, which does not receive tax dollars to support its operation. The Historical Society is a 501(c)(3) not-for-profit organization. It is exempt from 1970-2016 for related spaces in Pleasant Home in Hill Park.

The sign was installed in 2023 during the building's 128th anniversary year through the generosity of the Philander Barclay Society, a group of donors to the Historical Society who share the love of local history of Pleasant Home and River Forest. The sign also tells the story of the building's history and its renovation. The sign was designed and installed by the Historical Society's volunteer staff.

Museum Coming Events

In addition to our Holiday Open House on November 25 and our members-only Firehouse 125th Anniversary Party on December 1 (featured on page 1 of this newsletter), OPRF Museum is pleased to offer the following upcoming events.

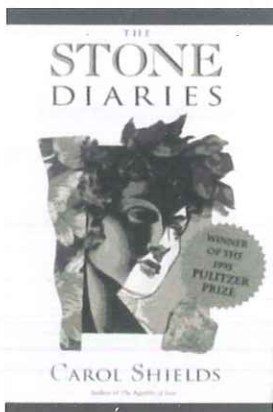
Tuesday, November 28, 11 a.m. **"Inside OPRF Museum" Features Artifacts Donated in 2023**

The Tuesday after Thanksgiving is "Giving Tuesday," a global day of sharing where donors show support for their favorite organizations. But it's not just monetary donations that help our museum grow!

On Tuesday, November 28, at 11 a.m., Operations Manager Rachel Berlinski will share some of the fantastic artifacts that people have given to OPRF Museum this year in the latest edition of our online series *Inside OPRF Museum*, including artifacts from all eras of OPRF High School, WW II memorabilia collected by local servicemen, items showcasing local authors, artists, athletes, and more.


This event is free and will last around 30 minutes. Contact us on our website and tell us you would like to attend this live program via Zoom.

Thursday, November 30, 7 p.m. **History Book Club with Doug Deuchler**



Our History Book Club will meet at OPRF Museum on November 30 at 7 p.m. to discuss *The Stone Diaries* by Oak Park native Carol Shields. This novel about a woman's struggle to find her place in her own life won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, the National Book Critics Circle Award, and the Canadian Governor General's

Award for English language fiction.


The December meeting of the Book Club is Thursday, December 28, at 7 p.m. Watch our social media feeds or visit our website for the announcement of the Book Club's December selection, coming soon. 

Wednesday, December 6, 7 p.m. **"A Night at the Museum" Hosts High School Parent Volunteers**

On the first Wednesday of each month, OPRF Museum is open from 7 to 8:30 p.m. During the 2023-24 OPRF High School Sesquicentennial celebration we will celebrate a different aspect of the OPRF High School experience each month.


On December 6, the spotlight will be on the OPRF High School Booster Club and other parent-led high school support groups like APPLAUSE, Community Council, and APPLE. We will host the monthly Boosters Club meeting and current and former parent volunteers will have the opportunity to enjoy refreshments and tour the new exhibit. Museum staff and volunteers will be there to answer questions and share stories.

Among the future *A Night at the Museum* events being planned are: girls' sports before and after Title IX; the history of student dress and conduct codes; and the OPRFHS Spoken Word program.

These events are free to everyone. 

Thank You for Making Our Cemetery Walk a Success

After a very rainy week, we had a beautiful fall day for our 32nd annual "Tale of the Tombstones" Cemetery Walk on October 15th. Thank you to everyone who came for the tour and to all our wonderful volunteers who helped plan and execute this event. And special thanks to the actors who brought the historic characters to life: Lee Conte as Lillie Pitkin; Paula Fenza as May Estelle Cook; Mike Stewart as Walter Gale; Ty Mayberry as Joseph Corbin; Sean Bernard as Percy Sloan; and Tyler Watkins as Kenneth Fearing.

Mark your calendar for next year's walk on the third Sunday in October. 



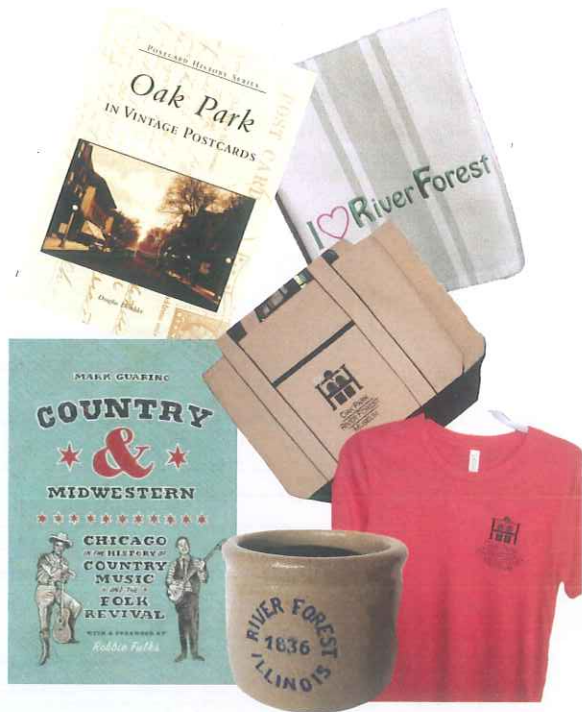
*Paula Fenza as educator
and social activist
May Estelle Cook*



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For Holiday Gifts, Books, Posters, and More, Come Shop at the OPRF History Store

Looking for great holiday gift ideas with an Oak Park or River Forest theme? Our History Store may have just what you need. Choose from a selection of books, posters, clothing, home decor items, photos, souvenirs, and more that all celebrate the villages we love.

And for that history lover, genealogist, or house researcher on your list, a gift membership to The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest makes an ideal holiday present. In addition to free admission to the museum, your gift will include discounts on programs and merchandise in our store, a subscription to our newsletter, and free access to OPRF Museum's Fields Research Center.

The History Store is open during our regular hours, Wednesday through Saturday, 1 to 5 p.m. But if you can't come in to browse our gift items, you can shop online any time at oprfmuseum.org/shop-online.