



New LEGO® Minifigures Scavenger Hunt Puts Big Spotlight on Tiny Hometown Legends This Summer

Jennie Stevens loves libraries and history. So, on a vacation to Dublin this spring, she made certain to visit Marsh's Library, Ireland's first public library, located in a gorgeous landmark building that was once the haunt of literary figures like Oscar Wilde and Jonathan Swift. But little did she know that she would actually meet Wilde, Swift and other luminaries hidden in the historic stacks. Or at least tiny replicas of these authors and other figures with ties to the Marsh!

The Scavenger Hunt of LEGO® Minifigures (each one under two inches tall) was an unexpected pleasure for Stevens, who works as an Adult Services librarian at the Thomas Ford Memorial Library in Western Springs. She decided to bring the idea back home.



All the LEGO® Minifigures gathered in front of our LEGO® representation of OPRF Museum (created by David Quinlan) before dispersing to their places in exhibits throughout the museum. Can you find them all?

Stevens, a member of the Historical Society Board since 2019, pitched the idea of creating a similar Scavenger Hunt as a family-friendly activity for all ages to enjoy at OPRF Museum. The board agreed and Stevens began designing the Minifigures. She knew that our two villages have a plethora of accomplished and famous folks who could be replicated as custom LEGO® Minifigures.

She was even able to include a cat with the Minifigure that resembles Oak Park's famous son, Ernest Hemingway. Whether the cat has six toes like the ones at Hemingway's Key West home, we're not sure. That's how small these figures are! Betty White, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Dr. Percy Julian are also at the museum, waiting patiently for you to find them among the exhibits and displays.

At Oak Park's Fourth of July Parade, museum volunteers handed out bookmarks announcing the arrival of the LEGO® Minifigures and the kick-off of the Scavenger Hunt. Earlier that week, so the museum would be ready for visitors on Friday, July 5, the LEGO® Minifigures were stationed in 12 spots throughout the museum to create the Hometown Legends Scavenger Hunt.

Visitors to OPRF Museum are given a handout at the reception desk showing pictures of the various Minifigures that have been included in the exhibits and displays so they know exactly what they are looking for.

As visitors search for the Minifigures they will also be looking for information about them in relation to a word search quiz. The key includes blanks for visitors to fill in when they find each Minifigure. For example, when searching for the Minifigure of Tarzan, a character created by former Oak Parker Edgar Rice Burroughs, they will

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learn he was also referred to as Man of the Apes and would then fill in "apes" on their key.

When deciding which LEGO® Minifigures to create, Stevens, a 2012 graduate of OPRF High School, also included some who had connections to the high school. In addition to Hemingway, who graduated in 1917, there is a Huskie mascot Minifigure to find as well as alum and Olympian Emery Lehman. Perhaps you will find them hanging around in the high school's anniversary exhibit, "Ever-Changing, Yet the Same: OPRF High School at 150."

Among the Minifigures is a group of firefighters, fitting since our museum home was built in 1898 as a fire house. Several visitors who have already searched the museum for the LEGO® Minifigures seem to agree that the firefighters have been the most difficult to find. We'll give you a clue: They're hidden as a group.

And while you're in the museum, check out the LEGO® firehouse created by David Quinlan when he was a 15-year-old freshman at OPRF High School. It's not part of the Hometown Legends Scavenger Hunt, but it's a great replica of your hometown museum.

So, now that you know all about our newest endeavor, are you up to the challenge? Think you can find them all? Be sure to visit soon and spread the word!

The Hometown Legends LEGO® Scavenger Hunt can be



In a dozen spots throughout the museum, LEGO® Minifigures ranging from Frank Lloyd Wright (top) to Saturday Night Live alumna Cecily Strong (bottom) are hidden in plain sight.

pursued anytime OPRF Museum is open. Participants who find all of the Minifigures will earn a prize and can be entered in a drawing for their choice of a Radio Flyer wagon or scooter.

For information about these and other Hometown Legends, visit our website at oprfmuseum.org.

And be sure to let us know which Hometown Legends you think should be elevated to LEGO® Minifigure form in the future.

Thanks to Jennie Stevens for bringing the Scavenger Hunt to OPRF Museum. We think it will be a fun activity for young and old alike.



Jennie Stevens, librarian and OPRF Museum board member, visiting Marsh's Library in Dublin, Ireland, on her recent vacation.

History Matters

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

Oak Park or Jurassic Park? When Reptiles Roamed Our Streets

By Bob Messer, OPRF Museum Volunteer

On a hot August day in 1927, a routine trespassing call came into the Oak Park police station.

The responding officer was Milton D. Gill, a motorcycle cop locally famous for catching bootleggers and, curiously, his expertise about snakes. But that wasn't all. As an *Oak Leaves* reporter put it, he was knowledgeable about "other such fancies that sometimes possess those who have grown intimate with the cab [wine] that inebriates." In less flowery words, the cops thought the caller was drunk or suffering from alcoholic delusions.

The poetically inclined reporter made clear that although familiar with his work regarding "the reptile that disturbs the peace of mind of those who imbibe," Officer Gill himself had "never mingled the spirits of the vine with the cider of his Adam's apple," but was "straight-laced and sober."

This was befitting a policeman in Oak Park, which at that time had banned alcohol for some 50 years, long before the 18th Amendment made it illegal across the United States. Gill was considered among the department's best at catching bootleggers transporting booze into the village. In fact, he was a "trained" sniffer who could detect alcohol sealed in containers hidden in cars. Certainly, this officer was up to the task.

But what he found when he arrived at the scene was not an alcohol-induced hallucination, but an animal control issue. The scene was a sandbox in the backyard of a home in the 200 block of South Ridgeland Avenue. The animal in question was not a horrifying illusion, but a 2-foot-long juvenile American alligator. Far from aggressive or menacing,

the reptile was contentedly basking in the cool water from a garden hose wielded by the homeowner's maid. It made no attempt to escape, but went along peacefully with Officer Gill who took it to the police station and waited for the owner to claim it. Someone

proposed that the new addition be fitted with a collar and a star and be used to scare sober prisoners in the drunk tank.

As reported in *Oak Leaves*, "S.O.S. distress signals sent out got results. M. J. Howel, 129 South Elmwood, appeared at headquarters, described the prisoner minutely, gave his name, age, place of birth, and described some of his tricks. He also explained that his pet had run away ten days ago... With this 'evidence' presented the prisoner was released and the police felt a good job had been well attended to by all present." Case closed.

A few days later the rival of the *Oak Leaves*, *The Oak Parker*, called the alligator "the first saurian to be captured alive in

Oak Park." It was in fact not the first. Just two years earlier, what was described as a 9-year-old alligator was captured in an alley at Superior and Euclid.

It was brought to the *Oak Leaves* office by W.C. Frederick of North Humphrey Avenue. Unfortunately, no photo accompanied this article, but if the estimate of the alligator's age is accurate, this was a much more formidable creature, measuring about 5 feet in length. The estimate apparently came from its captor, Mr. Frederick, who had once worked at an alligator farm in Florida. He told the *Oak Leaves* that one bite from such a beast was "deadly."

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Officer Milton Gill shows his "prisoner" to an unidentified woman in this photo from the scrapbook donated to OPRF Museum by the Gill family

Why he took it to the media rather than the police is unclear. Maybe Frederick wanted to publicize his claim on a reward of \$100 from the owner, a sizable finder's fee equal to more than \$1,700 today.

Unfortunately for Frederick, his prize catch died two days after its capture. The reward was unclaimed. The incident ended with the Oak Park Police Department's assurance that "as far as can be learned, there are no other poisonous reptiles at large in Oak Park."

But why were any reptiles, poisonous or not, in Oak Park? Why here? Why then? It seems that by the 1920s, Florida, the main source of the "saurian" invasion, and Oak Park had developed new ties, both social and physical. Both were booming. Well-off Chicago suburbanites were seeking vacation destinations beyond Wisconsin or Michigan. The rail links that had helped restore Chicago after the Great Fire of 1871 and bound the suburbs to the city now stretched across the South and into the Florida

citrus groves that seemed to be a tropical paradise along its Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Families could travel comfortably and affordably by train to destinations like Miami or Tampa. One developer attempted to carve out a section of Sarasota named Oak Park, with streets named after those of its northern counterpart. [See "Snowbirds Flock to Oak Park in 1925," *History Matters*, Winter 2023-24.]

Chicago winters provided the push and Florida's exotic flora and fauna, including alligators – the attraction that still draws millions to the state. Like tourists everywhere Oak Parkers brought back souvenirs: shells, coconuts, and apparently, alligators.

The local social columns mention at least one small alligator given as a gift to a hostess.

Florida's real-estate bubble burst in the mid-1920s, a few years before the stock market crashed and ensuing Great Depression caused a tightening of belts

across the country. Wintering in Florida and bringing back mementos were no longer as popular with middle class Oak Parkers. From time to time there were references to alligators in the local press, but only in connection to children's fairs in the parks or carnival shows such as the Seminole alligator wrestling exhibit at the Century of Progress World's Fair in 1933.

Maybe history doesn't repeat itself, but sometimes we hear echoes from the past. Do you remember the alligator that lurked for several days in the lagoon in Chicago's Humboldt Park? Nicknamed "Chance the Snapper," after Chicago rap star Chance the Rapper, it became a media sensation just five summers ago in 2019.

Chance's saga ended with his uneventful capture by an expert trapper from, where else, Florida. But for Oak Park, the days of alligators roaming wild in our streets and sandboxes, are history.



Officer Milton Gill, pictured here with fellow officer Ed Olson, was better known for chasing down bootleggers on his motorcycle than for wrangling alligators. This photo is also from the Gill family scrapbook.

This story was inspired by a scrapbook donated to the Historical Society by the Gill family in 2023.

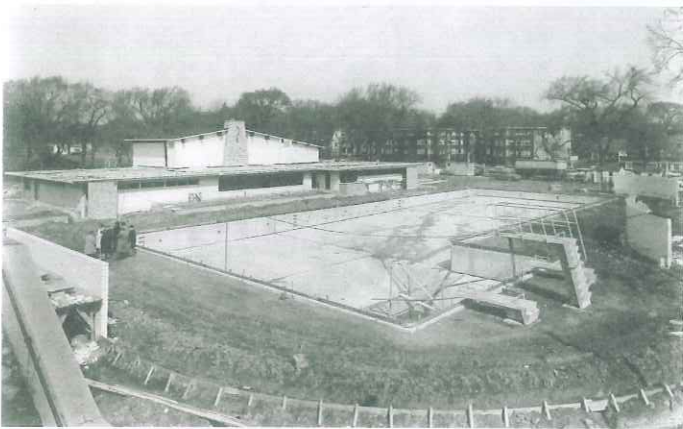
Author Bob Messer volunteers each week at the reception desk of OPRF Museum. He is an emeritus history professor from the University of Illinois Chicago.

Reflections on the Summer Solstice: Jump in, the Water's Fine!

By Fran Knechel, President of OPRF Museum

The Annual Meeting of the Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest was on the Summer Solstice – June 20—so we went all in on summer! I shared some research into pools in our community (excerpt below), Rachel Berlinski highlighted block parties, and Peggy Sinko led those gathered in reminiscing about summer traditions from fireflies to ice cream novelties.

When I moved to Oak Park in October 2015, I was thrilled to be within easy walking distance of Ridgeland Commons. Pool days are the epitome of summer, since pools are a place where you run into neighbors and friends, enjoy impromptu conversations and playtime, and feel the joy of jumping into the water. Pools offer a chance for community connection.



The Ridgeland Commons pool under construction in 1962.

Before the large pools existed, wading pools were popular in Oak Park from the 1920s into the 1940s. “I like the wading pool best, because it cools you off and keeps you refreshed,” resident Eleanor Walker told a reporter in 1923. Wading pools then were run by the Village of Oak Park Playground Board and seemed to be big draws for kids during the summer, open from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. By 1937, Stevenson, Anderson, Carroll, Field, and Barrie all featured a wading pool.

The Park District of Oak Park opened its first wading pool exactly 100 years ago this summer in what is today's Maple Park (then Roosevelt Park). There's evidence of a lot of differing opinions on



The wading pool at Stevenson Park, circa 1925

pools in our communities. In a 1919 article H.A. Taylor, president of the park board, said, “We planned a wading pool in Scoville Park six or seven years ago and the citizens raised such a howl of protest that we had to quit. Plans now call for one in South Park (today's Rehm), and this plan will go thru.” It didn't until 1966!

In June 1929, *Oak Leaves* reported that in River Forest “Street showers for the edification of small boys and girls will be operated by the recreation board beginning Monday. These will be conducted until a wading pool is available.” In River Forest, there were referendums for municipal pools in 1938 and 1972 and neither passed. The River Forest Tennis Club pool was available to its members beginning in 1937.


Ridgeland Common's grand opening day for swimming was July 4, 1962 and safety was a selling point, including well-trained lifeguards and recommended safety breaks. Pool publicity raved about the concession stand but also reminded swimmers that “health authorities recommend a minimum of one-hour rest after eating before entering the pool.”

The reopening of the pools after COVID also reminded us what we missed when we had to stay apart. But closures on account of health scares were not new as polio outbreaks shut down all of the original wading pools in the 1940s.

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Reflections on Summer (Continued from page 5)

Jeff Wiltse, author of the 2007 book, "Contested Waters: A Social History of Swimming Pools in America," concludes that "Swimming pools and public space generally have the potential to foster a vibrant community life by counteracting many of the segmenting and alienating aspects of modern life."

Labor Day may mark a close to the summer pool season, but the sunny memories keep bringing us together. 

Leap of Faith: The Legend of the Rehm Pool High Dive

Note: Former Oak Park resident Patrick Brent reminisced about the third diving platform at Rehm Pool, a fixture from the pool's 1966 opening until its 2019 demolition, in response to the Historical Society's Facebook "Friday Flashback" on July 5 showing the outside concession stand at Rehm Pool. Below is a short excerpt published with his permission; for the complete post, follow us on Facebook!

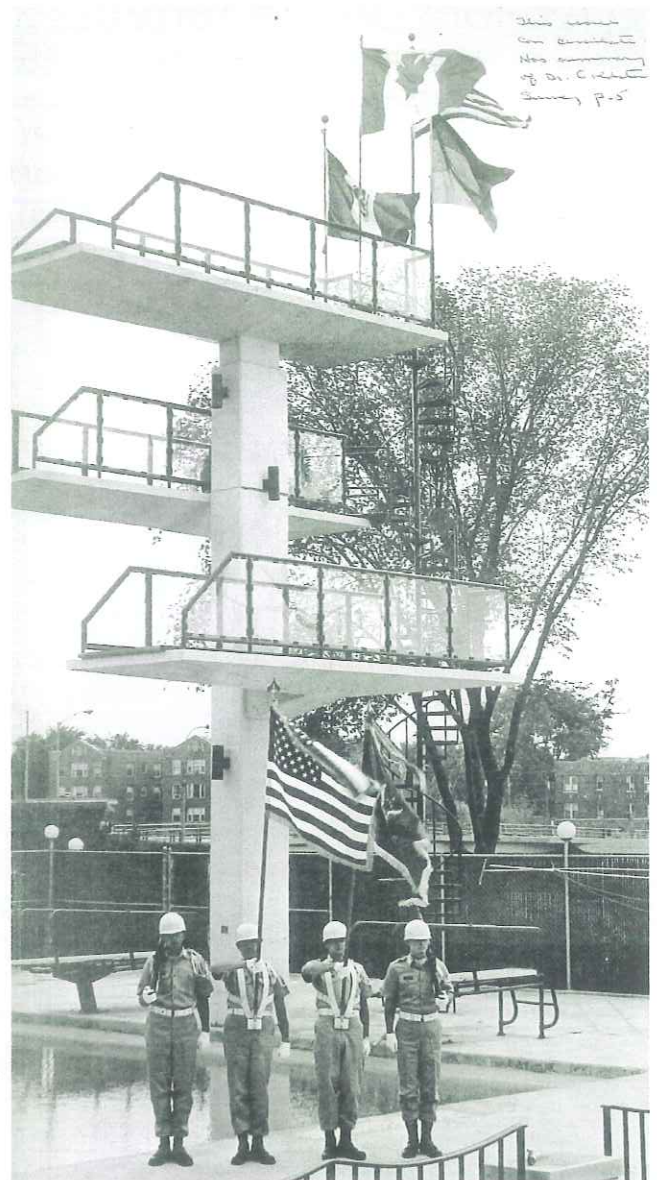
Rehm was the spot!

Sitting alone on my porch in Kalamazoo, Mich., I was hit by a breeze holding the perfect, unexpected olfactory combination of chlorine, Super-Ropes, hot dogs, Atomic Fireballs, and popcorn, which instantly transported me across time to Oak Park and the long summer days spent at Rehm Pool as a kid in the mid-1980s.

Those summers between the 5th, 6th, and 7th grades were heady times, where a public pool pass and our advanced ages of 11-13 years meant the first tastes of latch-key freedom away from prying eyes of parents who worked during the day, and long hours spent hanging out at the pool with friends under the looming menace of that South Side Oak Park rite of passage – the Third Platform.


Gone now, lost to age and rising insurance costs, "The Third," as we referred to it in hushed, reverent tones, was the highest of a three-platform Olympic diving tower built in the late 1960s at Rehm (pronounced "Reem"), our local public pool.

Standing tall against the sky, The Third was roughly the same height as a three-story building, and



A U.S. Army color guard opened the National Amateur Athletic Union's "World Series of Swimming" Men's Swimming and Diving Championships with Rehm Pools's diving platform as backdrop when the event was held in Oak Park in August 1967. Teams from the United States, Canada, Mexico, and West Germany competed.

(Photo from Forest Leaves, August 10, 1967)

even the initial climb to it via its narrow, rickety spiral staircase with mushy, waterlogged plywood stairs was scary enough to turn many kids around mid-ascent, and flinging yourself from it was a local rite of passage that played a major role in our social hierarchy at that age. Rehm Pool was a melting pot, and when encountering unfamiliar kids from different neighborhoods, their answer to "Have you gone off The Third?" gave our young minds a solid indication of exactly where they stood within the order of things. 

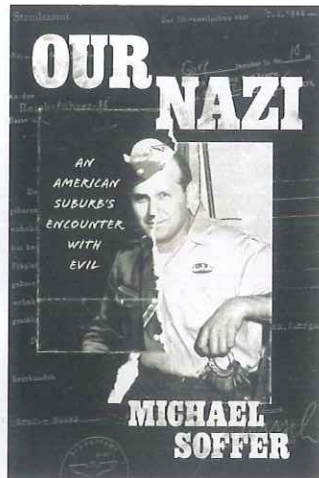
Fall Programs at OPRF Museum: A Janitor with a Dark Secret, An Insightful Political Cartoonist, and Black History and Hometown Legends Bus Tours

As we went to press for this issue, we were finalizing our fall schedule of public programs. In addition to our annual Tale of the Tombstones walk on Oct. 20 and our Children's Day on Lake Street event on Sept. 22 [see back cover] below are a few details. Save the Dates for these great programs and check out oprfmuseum.org for more details.

Our Nazi: New Book Examines the Story of Reinhold Kulle

On Sunday, Sept. 29, at 3 p.m. at OPRF Museum, hear the story of a Nazi camp guard who hid his past and became a popular and long-time custodian at OPRF High School. His deception was uncovered and he was removed from his job and eventually deported late in his life.

Author and former OPRF history teacher Michael Soffer will share his insights about his research that resulted in the new book "Our Nazi" published this month by University of Chicago Press, which will be available for purchase and to be signed by the author.



Mixing Art and Politics in an Election Year

Join us on Thursday, Oct. 10, at 7 p.m. at OPRF Museum to hear the insights and stories from award-winning multimedia artist Joe Fournier, an OPRF graduate and Oak Park resident. Coming weeks before the Presidential Election, Fournier will share



Joe Fournier

examples of his work and his creative process that spans 30 years as an award-winning political cartoonist with the *Chicago Tribune*, from the Clinton administration through the emergence of Donald Trump up to the current campaign between him and Kamala Harris.

Fournier is a uniquely authentic artist, using an uncommon yet compelling visual language to help relieve us from an extremely divisive, relentlessly hostile, social climate. Fournier's work has been shown at The National Gallery of Art, The Cannes Film Festival, and he has works in The Library of Congress.

Black History and Hometown Legends Featured on Bus Tours

Oak Park River Forest Museum is pleased to announce that we are teaming up with Visit Oak Park to offer two new local bus tours this fall.

First will be a Black History Tour on Sunday, November 10, leaving from OPRF Museum at 1:30 p.m. The route will pass by significant locations in Oak Park, River Forest and Maywood as our guide narrates the story of African Americans and their contributions in the near west suburbs.



The site of Mt. Carmel Baptist Church will be just one of the stops on our Black History Bus Tour.

The second bus tour on Sunday, November 24, will include stops in front of the homes and sites associated with some of our Hometown Legends. Think of it as the Oak Park-River Forest version of a Hollywood homes tour.

Details for these tours are being finalized. Watch for announcements coming soon on our social media, via email, and on our website at oprfmuseum.org.



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RIVER FOREST
MUSEUM

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Children's Day on Lake Street Sunday, Sept. 22



1. Jim Gill concert at Pilgrim
Preschool/Church at 12 Noon
\$20 suggested donation per family

2. Come build at OPRF
Museum 2-4 p.m. Hunt for
LEGO Minifigures throughout
the museum. Free!



3. End the day with Family Bingo at One Lake
Brewing, 4 p.m. (Reservations recommended)

Tale of the Tombstones

Join Other "Kindred Spirits" on October 20th for
Our Annual Cemetery Walking Tour

Join us on Sunday, October 20, for our annual Tale of the Tombstones walking tour of Forest Home Cemetery which kicks off at noon. Tickets are available for purchase in 10-minute intervals between noon and 1:30 p.m. This year's walk focuses on the north area of the cemetery, with the theme "Kindred Spirits."

This section was opened in 1873 under the name German Waldheim Cemetery and appealed to those interested in a non-sectarian burial ground. There are multiple fraternal, labor, and group burial sections in the area, including the grand monuments for the United Ancient Order of Druids and the Independent Order of Odd Fellows.

"Kindred Spirits" is a phrase that celebrates people who join together with others who have similar interests or attitudes. It also has the spirit of "coming together" instead of "pulling apart," which is central to groups and organizations advancing social, political, and other activist causes..

Available starting September 1st, purchase your tickets for a time slot on the tour. Visit our website oprfmuseum.org or call the museum at 708-848-6755. This year's walk is underwritten by Conboy-Westchester Funeral Home.

