



Arts and Education Are Focus of 2023 Oak Park River Forest Museum Gala Community invited to celebrate "Heart of Our Villages" award winners and support OPRF Museum

By Mary Ann Porucznik, 2023 Gala Chair

If you are ready to get back in the swing of things in 2023 mark your calendar for Thursday, March 9, and plan to attend Oak Park River Forest Museum's fourth annual fundraising gala. In addition to the food, fun, and friends that have become hallmarks of the gala, you can expect to experience some new delights, including musical entertainment and a commemorative program booklet.

During the gala, which will be held at The Nineteenth Century Club, 178 Forest Ave., Oak Park, two remarkable women will be honored with the OPRF Museum 2023 "Heart of Our Villages" award. The award



Camille Wilson White

recognizes individuals who have made Oak Park and River Forest better places to live and work and whose very lives exemplify the unique characteristics and spirit of our communities.

The 2023 honorees—Camille Wilson White and Jan Novak Dressel—have strong ties to both Oak Park and River Forest. Both have had long careers in education and the arts and are well-known for their community connections.

Faced with housing discrimination when she and her husband Julius first tried to rent an Oak Park apartment in 1976, Camille Wilson White was quickly and ably assisted by the Community Relations department and saw firsthand Oak Park's commitment to building a diverse and welcoming community. She has brought that same spirit to her



Jan Novak Dressel

leadership role in the arts community on the local, statewide and national levels. She proudly describes how she spearheaded the 2001 "Symphony of Place," a multi-dimensional, multi-disciplinary musical salute to Oak Park's diversity which brought the arts community and Fair Housing activists together.

After a retail career culminating at Marshall Field's, Camille joined the board of the Oak Park Area Arts Council (OPAAC), rising to become President for a few years before being recruited to be Executive Director in 1999. She also serves as a board member of Arts Alliance Illinois, the state arts advocacy group. She jokes she has become the "Czar of Public Art" with the multiple programs under the Arts Council umbrella. She has long been actively involved in the Oak Park community, serving on the executive committee of the Village Manager Association, as chapter president of African-American Parents for Purposeful Leadership and Education (APPLE) at Holmes and Emerson (now Brooks) Junior High School in Oak Park, and on several committees for both District 97 and District 200 schools.

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Her support and involvement with the arts are well-known. She is a recipient of the Oak Park River Forest Chamber of Commerce's Athena Award, recognizing her business and professional accomplishments, community service and mentorship skills. In 2008, she was honored with the first "Friend of the Year" award presented by *Chicago a cappella*, one of the area's most accomplished and innovative vocal ensembles. She has played an integral role in increasing and recognizing diversity in the arts, not only by diversifying the overall membership and board of directors of OPAAC but also using her position to bring attention to works by women and people of color through programs such as the mini-murals along the CTA/Metra tracks.

"Camille really cares about the youth and gives resources to the youth," Hasani Cannon, a participant in the "Off the Wall" summer employment program told a local newspaper. A mother of two sons, and a grandmother, Camille often says of young people, "They are our future."

River Forest resident Jan Novak Dressel grew up in nearby North Riverside and attended Knox College, where she majored in American Studies. She later earned a certificate in elementary education at Elmhurst College, and a master's degree from the National College of Education. Beginning her Oak Park teaching career at Lincoln School, Jan later spent nearly 20 years at Hatch School, retiring as a gifted resource instructor. After her retirement, she continued to work part time as a substitute teacher.

After her graduation from Knox, Jan began to give Chicago Architecture Foundation tours of Forest Avenue, hired by the late architectural historian Jeanette Fields. She and other tour guides like young architect John Thorpe often chatted with Mrs. Nooker, then the owner of the former Frank Lloyd Wright home at Forest and Chicago. Jan remembers the first meeting inside the Frank Lloyd Wright Home and Studio after it was acquired for a museum and Elsie Jacobsen asked she, Thorpe and others to give tours of the interior, still carved up into apartments. Jan would continue to give tours for the next 35 years or so!

Before the restoration began in earnest, Jan lived for a time in one of the apartments and served as a caretaker, shoveling snow and the like. Stopping into nearby Dressel's Hardware, she met her husband Chuck. They were married 42 years until his death in 2018 and they raised three children in their River Forest home. Jan also has 4 grandchildren; she often jokes she has 5, adding Oak Park River Forest Museum to her list.

Jan has been active in The Historical Society of Oak Park and River Forest for about 35 years, many of which she spent on the Society's Board of Directors, including multiple terms as president. She spearheaded the "Twelfth Night" fundraiser for the Historical Society for several years and currently serves as the founding chair of the Barclay Society of generous donors to OPRF Museum.. She makes history come alive for children as the "Hands-On History Lady." In 2018, Jan was recognized by the Illinois Association of Museums with a Lifetime Volunteer Award.

The Dressels were among the "Founding Families" of the OPRF Museum and Jan continues to volunteer there, especially when student groups visit. (Read Jan's interview with Operations Manager Rachel Berlinski in the Summer 2018 issue of History Matters, available on the OPRF Museum website.)

"Jan is always at the heart of building relationships and making people feel welcome, as well as finding a way to stick in some history," said Peggy Tuck Sinko, president of the Historical Society. As an example, Peggy noted that Jan has researched every home on her block. Whenever someone new moves in, she presents them with a copy of the research on their home.

"These are two remarkable women who have made a significant difference in the lives of Oak Park and River Forest residents," said Peggy. "We are delighted to recognize their achievements with the 'Heart of Our Villages' award."

"I have known Jan and Camille for many years," agrees OPRF Museum Executive Director Frank Lipo. "Their commitment to our communities and their degree of involvement certainly embody the spirit of this award." 

Field Trips Bring a Record Number of Students to OPRF Museum During December

December 2022 saw more than four hundred students and their teachers visit Oak Park River Forest Museum on school-sponsored field trips to learn



Second graders from Beye School

more about the history of our villages, setting a new record for field trip visitors in a single month. Visitors to the museum included all the Second Grade classes from Beye Elementary School, a "History of Chicago" class from Oak Park River Forest High School, and the entire Sixth Grade class from Percy Julian Middle School, who visited in multiple small groups.



One of the several groups of Sixth Graders from Julian Middle School

OPRF Museum provides a unique opportunity to learn about Oak Park and River Forest history in the classroom, at home, and at the museum. For more information on how we can help you with your lesson planning or how to plan a future visit contact us on our website, oprfmuseum.org; by email at oprfhistorymatters@sbcglobal.net; or phone 708-848-6755.

OPRF Museum Team Turns in a Perfect Game At Chamber of Commerce Trivia Event

On Thursday, October 27, the Oak Park River Forest Chamber of Commerce Young Professionals Affinity Group held its annual Trivia Night for nonprofit organizations at Good Earth Greenhouse in River Forest.

OPRF Museum had its team lineup ready to go when disaster struck! Just a few days before the event, one of the team members was diagnosed with COVID and the day before the event another member tested positive, too.



Our Trivia Dream Team (Left to Right) Louise Stevens, Jennie Stevens, Sarah Doherty, and Chris Damon

Fortunately, longtime Historical Society member, volunteer, and trivia lover Chris Damon stepped forward to fill in and, at the last minute, Museum Board member Jennie Stevens drafted her mother, Louise, to round out the team.

Not only did our team win, they turned in a perfect game getting every question correct including all the bonus questions! The grand prize was a one-year membership in the OPRF Chamber of Commerce for OPRF Museum.



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

Reaching Out Beyond Our Brick and Mortar Museum

Traveling Open House Exhibit at Oak Park Public Library for Black History Month Observance

Oak Park River Forest Museum is collaborating with Oak Park Public Library to tell stories about Black History in our community during the month of February.

Juanta Griffin, OPPL Multicultural Learning Coordinator, has curated an exhibit for Black History Month called *The Work* in the Idea Box inside the front entrance of the main library. The struggle for social justice and racial equity are often referred to as "The Work" and the exhibit features leaders who have defied racial barriers to lay the foundation for our diverse, progressive village from early days until 2023. In addition to photos and biographies of some of these movers and shakers, memorabilia related to the local observance of Juneteenth are on display.



Juanta Griffin with one of the portable Open House banners

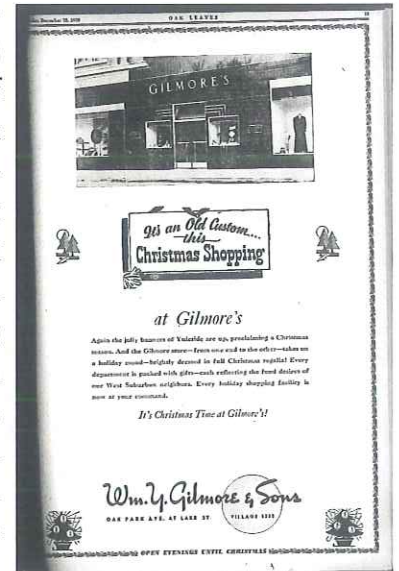
OPRF Museum loaned a dress worn by Oak Parker Marjorie Judith Vincent when she became Miss America in 1991, and a set of five banners that tell some of the stories of Oak Park's long struggle to become a more diverse community, including some of the highlights and lowlights of that journey.

Developed with a grant from the Oak Park Area Arts Council as a way to share the content of our exhibit *Open House: The Legacy of Fair Housing* out in the community, each brightly-colored pop-up banner is packed with content and photos.

Two of the banners are in the Idea Box and the other three are centrally located by the circulation desks on each floor.

Visit Our New "Window to History" Exhibit at Oak Park Bank

Before Oak Park Bank opened its doors at 151 N. Oak Park Avenue, the space had been the home of JB Winberies Restaurant for 37 years. But Winberies wasn't the longest tenant at this location. For nearly 60 years, from 1917 to the end of 1976, this was the home of Gilmore's Department Store, a local family-owned business that helped make Oak Park a destination for retail shopping, drawing customers from throughout Chicago and the western suburbs in the era before the rise of the shopping mall.



Stop by our "Window to History" on the Lake Street side of Oak Park Bank to see some memorabilia from Gilmore's Department Store as well as a few vintage photos of Lake Street.

This Oak Leaves ad from 1938 is one of the pieces on display

Special thanks to Oak Park Bank for dedicating this window as a public space for OPRF Museum to share stories from the rich history our villages. Our display will change 3 to 4 times a year, so watch for a new window coming this Spring!

OPRF Museum Shares Stories of Villages on YouTube Channel

Did you know OPRF Museum has a YouTube channel that allows you to watch some wonderful stories about our towns from virtually anywhere? Just go to YouTube.com and type OPRFHistSociety in the search box. You can even subscribe to our YouTube channel and get notified whenever we post a new video. Just click the "Subscribe" button on our YouTube page.

The Seekers of Cuyler Avenue and the Saucers of Clarion

by Frank FioRito

December 24th, 1954, found many Oak Park residents anticipating the arrival of Santa Claus and his sleigh. The Christmas season was nearing its climax in a spirit of goodwill and joy, but not for all. On the 700 block of south Cuyler Avenue, a group of 20 gathered with 54-year-old Oak Park housewife Dorothy Martin in anticipation of something quite different: the 6 p.m. arrival of a flying saucer that would rescue them from impending disaster and whisk them away to the planet Clarion.

Dorothy had long been attracted to the occult and science fiction. Since the newspapers first reported sightings of UFOs in 1947, she was intrigued by the notion of extraterrestrial beings visiting Earth. She was not alone in her interests as witnessed by the many UFO clubs that formed around the country.

Dorothy also considered herself blessed with a unique gift, that of being able to channel communications with the spirit world. This gift was something she intended to use for the benefit of others. By 1954, she was no longer just receiving messages from departed Earthlings; she was communicating with benevolent extraterrestrials who cared for the welfare of Earth's people.

Dr. Charles A. Laughead, a Michigan physician, was also fascinated by flying saucers and often sought out UFO club meetings. He was thrilled to meet Dorothy at one of these meetings. Not only was she a fellow believer; she actually could communicate with the beings flying them!


In the autumn of 1954, Dorothy shared a message with Laughead, one she had received from the beings of the planet Clarion. They warned of impending doom. On December 21, 1954, a catastrophic earthquake and flood would wipe out most of life in the central part of the United States. Further cataclysms would follow and end most life on Earth, but a select few Earthlings would be rescued by space craft from the planet Clarion.

Having attempted to alert the world of the impending doom, Dr. Laughead made the journey from Michigan to join Dorothy and other believers in Oak Park. They spent a long night waiting.

By 4:45 a.m. on December 22, tired and still on this planet, the group received new instructions communicated to Dorothy by the "space brothers." The new departure time was now set for 6:00 p.m. on December 24th.

As instructed by the space beings, the group assembled outside of Dorothy's Cuyler Avenue home to sing Christmas Carols until departure time. This group was the self-described "Brotherhood of the Seven Rays," or in short, "The Seekers." Christmas dawned with no space craft arriving; Cuyler Avenue fell quiet. Dorothy's husband Harold, who was not a Seeker, accepted his wife's need to follow her own beliefs. Oak Park police Chief Thomas P. Kearin was not as accepting. He considered charging Dorothy with inciting a riot and contributing to the delinquency of minors. When Harold agreed to have his wife placed under psychiatric care outside Illinois, Kearin agreed to let the matter drop.

After examination and professional evaluation, both Dorothy Martin and Charles A. Laughead were deemed sane. They were, however, also deemed mistaken.

The Martins and Dr. Laughead both eventually moved to Arizona, where Dorothy, now known as Sister Thedra, continued to provide prophesy to those seeking it until her death in 1992. 



Dorothy Martin and Dr. Charles Laughead in a widely circulated news photo from December 1954. (AP Wirephoto)

This abridged version of Frank FioRito's story "The Seekers of Cuyler Avenue" was written for our website's "This Month in History" series. Visit oprfmuseum.org to read the entire piece and other great stories from the rich history of our two villages. And go to [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) and enter OPRFHistSociety in the search box to view FioRito's deeper dive into this subject in his "Ask the Historian" segment entitled "Flying Saucers in Oak Park?," a 27-minute video presentation.

Here and NOW: Records of the West Suburban Chapter of National Organization for Women Donated to OPRF Museum

by Karis Blaker, Archivist Intern

I am a historian, librarian, and an (almost) archivist. As a graduate student at Dominican University, a class requirement sent me out into the community to work with a local history organization and potentially process a physical archival collection from start to finish. Oak Park River Forest Museum immediately stood out to me. Once my class instructor put me in contact with Executive Director Frank Lipo and Operations Manager Rachel Berlinski, everything came together. I would be working with a yet-to-be-processed collection full of hidden women's and LGBTQ+ history gems!

The West Suburban chapter of the National Organization for Women (NOW) was active in the community and beyond between the years of 1980 and 2020. In 2020, two former members of West Suburban NOW, Jean Peterman and Mary Ann Porucznik, donated their organization records to the Museum. The materials donated included three full-size archival boxes of records, ephemera such as t-shirts, buttons, and picket signs, as well as photographs and one independently-produced VHS tape. I had roughly 35 hours in total to process this small-but-mighty collection, write a finding aid, and, to the best of my ability, make it searchable and accessible for researchers. I dove right in.

First, I went through the materials donated by Jean Peterman, whose work dealt primarily with reproductive justice in the decades following *Roe v. Wade*. This section of the collection is particularly rife with intriguing (if somewhat disturbing) stories. I read about out-of-line picketers who thought it appropriate to stage themselves outside of Peterman's home in

1987 to protest her life's work. The subsequent harassment Peterman faced after seeking legal action arrived by mail in the form of graphic postcards with rage-filled remarks, a feature of the collection that comes with a content warning.

In 1993, West Suburban NOW made formal complaints against a local fake abortion clinic giving misleading information to vulnerable people. The complaints were never seen through because the director of the clinic in question was found murdered by her live-in boyfriend shortly after the complaints were made! Disturbing stuff! Also, a lawsuit and subsequent Supreme

Court case titled *NOW v. Scheidler*, which dragged out through the late '80s and early '90s, gained incredible media attention for its efforts to prosecute anti-abortion protestors under racketeering and corruption laws. Don't get me wrong, a lot of the material is heavy; but its implications of larger phenomena surrounding reproductive justice in the 1980s and '90s are absolutely worth grappling with.



Karis Blaker processing materials in OPRF Museum's Jeanette Fields Research Center

Here and NOW (Continued from page 6)

Mary Ann Porucznik's records covered a lot of ground in terms of topics and organizational records. I tackled this box next. The most prominent story within this set of materials is about campaigning in favor of the Equal Rights Amendment, a proposed



Members of the West Suburban Chapter of the National Organization for Women, circa 1980. From left to right are Mary Ann Porucznik, Elaine Fiedler, unidentified, Mary Nelson, Olga Vives, Edie Reposh, Jean Peterman, and Rose Ann Porucznik

amendment to the United States Constitution that would guarantee equal rights for all American citizens regardless of sex. The history of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) would be familiar to anyone with a bachelor's degree in women's studies (me), or so I would like to think. Drafted by suffragists in 1923 and originally passed by Congress in 1972, the ERA had a ratification deadline of March 1979. It did not meet the deadline, and is actually still moving through the legislative system to this day, slowly, but hopefully surely. Nonetheless, I was thrilled to see campaign materials for the ERA in this collection.

Mixed up in these campaign materials were other records of Title IX legislation, pay equity, LGBTQ+ rights, advocacy for women of color, divorced women, single mothers, women with disabilities, and so much more that encapsulates this time period of women's history and struggle for equality. I spent a large

portion of my time sorting through these materials and organizing them according to cause. If you would like to get a sense of everything that women's organizations were up against in terms of legislation in the 1980s and '90s, come dig through the West Suburban NOW collection (please)!

My favorite part of this collection details the West Suburban NOW's activities around Women's History Month. Along with programs and dedications to remarkable women are submissions to an essay contest about Real Women of inspiration. I can't say I didn't get teary while reading dozens of handwritten essays by middle schoolers talking about their awe-inspiring mothers, aunts, grandmothers, teachers, neighbors, babysitters, and big sisters. Come check it out- you might find some familiar names!

While working in the research center at OPRF Museum, I got to meet volunteer extraordinaire Mary Ann Porucznik and discuss the collection with her each week. She brought in photographs to be accessioned and added to the



This NOW banner is now a permanent part of the OPRF Museum collection

collection, and provided insight into the materials I would not have had otherwise. My inspiration as an archivist and a historian is exactly what this collection represents: real, remarkable women whose legacies in the community and beyond are essential to the historical record. The preservation of these materials in the research center at OPRF Museum makes a statement about the kind of stories that this community believes are worth telling. My small contribution to this legacy has given me a burst of momentum as I finish my Masters degree in Library Science and enter the world of archival practice. 🍁

Clara Thatcher: The Woman Who Helped Bring the World to Chicago and Introduce River Forest to the World

by Jan Saeger

The idea of the “power couple” has become a popular trope in the 21st century. It refers to a couple who are each influential and successful in their own right and who support and aid each other in their endeavors. Although the term is relatively new, power couples have long played important roles in history.

In 1864, River Forest saw its first power couple when Clara E. Thatcher married Solomon Thatcher, Jr. (they shared the same surname but were not related). He was thirty one years old and she was more than a decade younger but looking back, there’s no question she was an equal partner in all aspects of their lives together.

Clara Thatcher was born on September 1 in 1843 (or possibly 1844; sources disagree and birth registration was not required at that time), at her parents’ house in Chicago, on Wabash Avenue between Washington and Madison Streets. She was the second of four children and the only daughter of David C. and Susannah Peacock Thatcher. David, who defined his occupation as “capitalist” was primarily a real estate dealer who did much to lay the foundation for Chicago to grow into the second largest city in the country. Susannah and her brother immigrated from England around 1836 when she was in her early twenties and opened a jewelry shop in Chicago, a gutsy move for one so young.

By 1858, Clara’s parents moved to River Forest, building a beautiful brick house in the Italianate style. For several years it faced Lake St. west of Thatcher. It was moved during the 1920s to 511 Edgewood where it still stands today.

After graduating from Chicago High School in 1862, Clara was certified as a teacher, one of the few

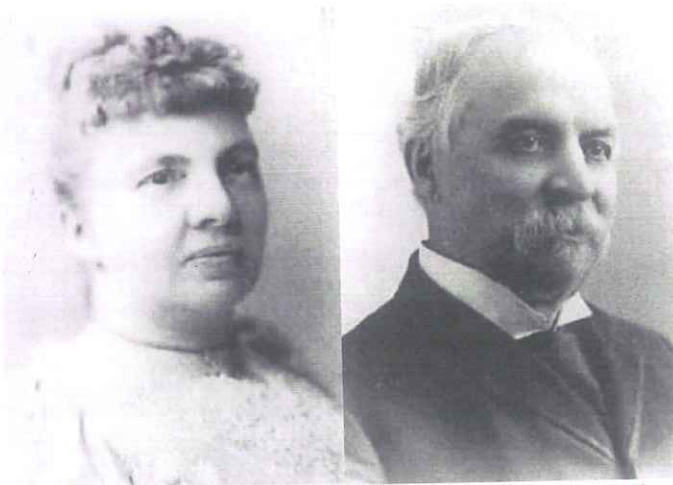
acceptable professions for women in those days. She held what the *Chicago Tribune* described as “an important position in the Chicago school system” and soon, at the age of only twenty-one, was offered the Deanship of Genesee College in central New York. She declined that position, however, to stay in the Chicago area and marry Solomon.

Clara and husband Sol, as he was known, proved to be a good match, working together on all levels in their personal, religious, and community lives. They first built a large Second Empire style home at 530 Keystone around 1870 and stayed there about six years. (This house burned down in 1906.) Their next house, built in 1876, was the iconic Second Empire house at 518 Keystone which maintains its commanding presence on the block to this day.

Their very active social life was often chronicled in the *Chicago Tribune* and other Chicago newspapers, reporting on sociables, theatricals, and other events. When their oldest child Maybelle turned 18, they held a birthday party for her at their private residence. A sumptuous supper was served to over 200 guests.

The earliest example we have of Clara’s devotion to her faith was when Frances Willard came to River Forest 1860 as an educator, teaching at the local school house. Clara and Frances partnered to teach Sunday School classes, Clara teaching the younger children. The two became lifelong friends.

Clara and Sol were both devout Methodists who helped found the First Methodist Episcopal Church of River Forest, along with Clara’s mother, Solomon’s father and other friends and neighbors. The church was incorporated 1871 and the land for the church was donated by Clara and Solomon.



Portraits of Clara and Solomon Thatcher, Jr., used as their official photographs for the Columbian Exposition publicity in 1893.

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Clara Thatcher (continued from page 8)

In 1875, Clara and Sol donated 200 acres on the shore of Lake Michigan to establish the Lake Bluff Methodist Summer Camp Meeting. Modeled on the Chautauqua movement, it became a regular stop on the Chautauqua circuit in the Midwest, a popular traveling show featuring rousing orators, well known singers, actors, musicians, and educators.

Clara and Sol Thatcher played a key role in the founding of the Village of River Forest in 1880. They, along with Clara's brothers, George and David, spearheaded a plan to incorporate a new village comprised of the unincorporated village of Thatcher (the west side of today's River Forest) and a portion of the unincorporated village of Harlem comprised of the area east of Lathrop Avenue and north of the Railroad tracks.



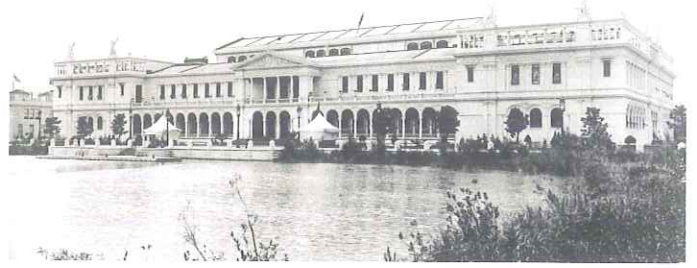
Clara Thatcher at age 16, about the time she met Frances Willard and formed a lifelong friendship.

Clara, a lifelong crusader for the Temperance movement, certainly used her influence to exclude all but two saloons from the boundaries of the proposed new village. A quick vote was held and the residents of the proposed village

approved incorporation. Despite a lawsuit by Harlem saloonkeepers to have the incorporation voided, the Illinois Supreme Court upheld the vote and the Village of River Forest was formed.

The Thatcher's most notable civic effort was undoubtedly their involvement in bringing the World's Fair of 1893, the Columbian Exposition, to Chicago. Clara served on the Board of Lady Managers and worked closely with Chairperson Bertha Palmer while Sol served on the Exposition's Executive Committee. The Thatchers' commitment to the Exposition was such that they even moved out of their River Forest mansion for a year and temporarily converted it into lodging for visiting dignitaries!

Among Clara's contributions was a plan to utilize school houses as dorms for teachers visiting the Fair. She was also mindful that visitors to the Fair would practice many different faiths.



The Woman's Building at the Columbian Exposition, commissioned by the Board of Lady Managers and designed by Sophia Hayden, the first woman to receive a degree in Architecture from M.I.T.

"Mrs. Thatcher has negotiations under way by which she hopes to secure the parochial schools of the Catholic Church for the housing of Parochial teachers visiting the Fair... She intends to agitate the question of the use of lecture rooms in churches as dormitories for visiting ministers..." the *Chicago Tribune* reported on August 20, 1892.

A gifted public speaker, Clara tirelessly travelled the western states to promote the Fair. She was the first non-Mormon to speak at the Tabernacle in Salt Lake City, addressing over 10,000 people. When Clara received a telegram from Chairlady Bertha Palmer asking her to speak in Ottawa, Kansas, with the notation, "Imperative!" Clara complied without hesitation.

It must have been exhilarating to attend the balls and receptions for the opening of The Fair. The description of Clara's dress for the Inaugural Ball is "trained gown in rich gray brocade, the décolleté bodice embroidered in pearls; dazzling display of diamonds including a necklace of valuable stones".

Sol Thatcher died of a stroke in January 1894. Clara retired from public life after his death and spent little time in River Forest. She spent the next few years taking extended trips to Europe with one or two of her daughters at a time. Clara was only 55 when she died just five years after Sol. She was laid to rest next to him at Rosehill Cemetery in Chicago.

So next time you travel past the most commanding house in River Forest at 518 Keystone, take time to think about River Forest's first "power couple," Clara and Solomon Thatcher, Jr., who lived there for over 20 years. Reminisce about their contributions to community on both a local and a national level and remember Clara's civic accomplishments in an era long before women won the right to vote.


Coming Events from Oak Park River Forest Museum

Thursday, February 16, 10 a.m.

Calling All Writers! New Creative Writing Group Forming

Please join us for a creative writing session at OPRF Museum. The inaugural meeting will be at 10 a.m. on Thursday February 16.

We'll open with a brief presentation of an item from the Museum's collection: an artifact, a photograph, a letter or other piece of ephemera. Participants will then have free time to start writing a creative piece based on the item. It might be a short story, an essay, a meditation, or perhaps a poem. At the end of the session, writers will have a few minutes to share their writing with the group if they wish.

Be sure to bring a pen and notebook, a laptop, a tablet, or whatever other supplies you will need. This session will run approximately an hour and fifteen minutes and is free to all participants. 

Thursday, February 23, 7 p.m.

History Book Club Debuts on Last Thursday Evening in February

Have you enjoyed curling up with a good book during this grey Chicago winter? If so, join like-minded readers at the new History Book Club each month at OPRF Museum to get out of the house and share lively conversation about literature and history.



Doug Deuchler


Led by Doug Deuchler, the Book Club will meet on the last Thursday of each month at OPRF Museum at 7 p.m. The plan is to schedule a variety of books over the course of the year, including non-fiction history, historical fiction, and books connected to the history of Chicago and the Midwest. And don't be surprised if we are partial to stories set in or inspired by our home villages!

We hope to appeal to a variety of tastes and also expect that selections will be suggested by group members once they attend a session or two.

The first book scheduled for a discussion on Feb. 23 is *Murder in the Park* by Jeanne M. Dams, a murder mystery set in a fictionalized Oak Park of the 1920s. Published in 2022, the author did extensive research on Oak Park and River Forest, including at OPRF Museum and was featured in the Summer 2022 edition of our newsletter.

The March 30 selection is *City of Scoundrels* by Gary Krist, a nonfiction account of 12 volatile days in 1919 that shaped Chicago's future. The April 27 selection is *Marrying the Ketchups* by Jennifer Close, a comedic story about the multi-generational family who run a fictional Oak Park burger joint.


So mark February 23, March 30, and April 27 on your calendar. The Book Club is free and open to all members of the Historical Society. We may need to cap the total attendance so the group doesn't get too large for a good discussion, so if you are interested in attending February 23, March 30, and/or April 27, please call us at 708-848-6755 or email us at oprfhistorymatters@sbcglobal.

We expect to start an email list of those who want to attend and know that some of you may be interested but not able to attend every session. Doug is working with the Oak Park Public Library to set aside copies of each book as part of the library's services to local book clubs and we will share details with anyone who signs up. 

Saturday, March 4, 1-5 p.m.

OPRF Museum Takes Part in Unity Temple Vintage Home Show

The Unity Temple Restoration Foundation is hosting its second annual Vintage Home Show on Saturday, March 4, and OPRF Museum will be there with a table showcasing some of the resources we have available for vintage home owners who would like to find out more about the history of their home as well as a few tips about how to get started on your research and what kind of things you may find along the way.

For more information on this event, please visit the Unity Temple Restoration Foundation website at <https://www.utrf.org/event/homeshow>. 

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Coming Events (continued from page 10)

Tuesday, April 18, 7 p.m.

Researching for the House Walk: How Do We Find Those Stories?

Our annual *Tales Our Houses Tell* Spring House Walk is coming up on Sunday, May 7, featuring six wonderful houses located near Oak Park & River Forest High School. But first, get a behind-the-scenes peek at how we gather the stories that make *Tales Our Houses Tell* such an engaging and memorable event.

A panel of our volunteer researchers who have worked on past house walks will discuss their research process, including how they approach studying a home's history, the resources they rely on most, and some of the surprising, strange, or funny stories they have come across in the course of their house research. And, while we won't be giving away the stories of the marvelous homes on this year's walk, you may get a few hints to whet your appetite!


So join us at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, April 18, for a casual discussion with plenty of time for questions from the audience. This event is free to OPRF Museum members. Regular Museum admission rates will apply for non-members. 

Sunday, April 23, 4 p.m.

Dining in Our Community: Past, Present, and Future

Mark your calendar for a very special event at OPRF Museum at 4 p.m. on Sunday, April 23rd, when *Takeout 25* founder and Oak Park Village Trustee Ravi Parakkat will conduct a panel discussion with a group of area restaurant owners.

Beginning with a brief historical overview of the restaurant business in our villages to provide context and perspective for the discussion, the panel will address past challenges, the state of the restaurant industry today, and positioning our community to be Illinois' first Green Dining District.

Details of this event are still being finalized. Watch for more information on our website, as well as social media announcements and email updates as plans are confirmed. 

Tuesday, April 25, 7 p.m.

Stories of Social Change As Seen Through the Lens of Labor History

Join us as we welcome Larry Spivack, long-time Oak Park resident and President of the Illinois Labor History Society, to OPRF Museum.


Spivack will delve into the history of the labor movement and share stories of the working people and events that helped transform America, focusing especially on Chicago and the Illinois region. A particular emphasis will be given to the Haymarket Affair, its lasting impact on workers, and the role it played in the creation of International Labor Day, also known as May Day.



Larry Spivack

Larry Spivack worked in the labor movement for nearly 40 years. While teaching high school at the Illinois State Psychiatric Institute residential facility, he joined his American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees local and was elected Vice-President. In 1984 he began working as an organizer, staff representative, and collective bargaining supervisor at AFSCME. In 2017, he retired as Regional Director of AFSCME Council 31 in Illinois.

Larry joined the Illinois Labor History Society Board in the late 1990s and has served as its President since 2006. He loves labor history so much that he says the most fun he has is being part of the Illinois Labor History Society. Giving labor history tours and presentations inspires him to keep on learning and teaching this vital part of America's story.

The program will last approximately one hour including a question and answer session at the conclusion of the presentation. This presentation will take place at 7 p.m. on Tuesday, April 25, and is free to OPRF Museum members. Regular museum admission rates will apply for non-members. 



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Quirky Local Landmark Finds Home at OPRF Museum

In 1957, on a whim, Henry “Bud” Mohr put a Christmas tree atop the hopper at the family’s ready-mix concrete business at 915 S. Maple in Oak Park...and then left it up. A few years later, he added a lighted Santa. Over time, the Christmas tree and Santa (seen atop the hopper in the upper right corner of the photo at the right) became something of a local landmark, visible from the Eisenhower Expressway, Harlem Avenue, and the surrounding neighborhoods. Both the tree and Santa were illuminated all year round.

H. J. Mohr & Sons closed in 2018 after over a century in business. In December 2022 this, the last Mohr Santa (pictured above), was donated to the Historical Society by Bud Mohr’s daughter, Karen. Oak Park firefighters retrieved Santa from the top of the hopper and delivered him to Oak Park River Forest Museum.

There were many different Santas placed on top of the hopper through the decades. Sun, wind, rain and snow took their toll. This particular Santa was placed there around the time the business officially closed its doors. Even in that short amount of time, the elements have bleached and battered this plastic Santa and given him a weathered and worn appearance.

