

BIRTH OF A MUSEUM

A personal memoir of the Saugatuck Douglas Historical Museum's first year
by Pat Dewey, then President of the Saugatuck Douglas Historical Society (SDHS)

In the beginning, the village of Saugatuck built a pumping station on the west bank of the Kalamazoo River to supply water to the town. First the south red brick building was put up and pumps moved in. Later it was expanded to the north, the floor level of the addition built one step higher than the original. This may have been for protection from pump leaks. By mid 20th century the pumping operation had been moved elsewhere and the building abandoned.

Second occupancy was by a Chicago artist allied with the Ox-Bow Summer School of Art (just up the road), her surgeon husband and their children. They rented it from Saugatuck and, after extensive renovation including installation of a fireplace, used it for a studio and summer home. The summer of 1988 the then widowed surgeon invited Ox-Bow Board members and me over for a cocktail party.

Toward the end of my first summer as president, 1992, Arlene Sherman approached me regarding the Pump House. At that time she was on the Saugatuck (now) City Counsel and had learned that the Pump House was vacant, the surgeon had died and none of his children were interested in using it and Saugatuck intended to sell. Members of SDHS talked about wanting a museum and wouldn't this be perfect. I told her wonderful, but it would take money and who would be fundraiser? She thought Bob Berger would. I called an ad hoc meeting of those I thought interested in a museum. We met at the end of August at the eight-foot picnic table on the back deck of my house.

Bob Berger, Caroline Evangelista, Bob Johnson, Chuck Lorenz, Todd Oleson, Arlene Sherman, Jeff Wilcox, Stan Wilson and I were at the first ad hoc meeting of the museum. It was decided to meet weekly thereafter at Jeff Wilcox's office. Bob Berger declined the fundraiser position and did not attend any further meetings. During the next few days Arlene Sherman volunteered to chair fund raising, with a goal of \$100,000.00, an amount high enough to be taken seriously. Chuck Lorenz agreed to do a weekly publicity release with photograph.

At the next monthly meeting of SDHS the idea for the museum was presented to the membership and a vote taken as to whether we should proceed in consideration of the considerable expense involved. There was great support. Pledges were requested. Every meeting thereafter a report on progress was delivered and a new request for vote as to proceed or not to proceed taken. Early pledges, mostly for \$1,000.00 each, were called in to finance fund raising.

In the meantime weekly meetings were proceeding, but the committee had no chair. I asked Jeff Wilcox, but he deferred to Chuck Lorenz. Chuck accepted momentarily, and then declined. I told Jeff that if we were to continue, there must be enough interest in the society for someone to chair the committee. By this time he had been substantially running the weekly meetings. After due consideration he accepted and did a magnificent job of getting the museum up and running.

In December Jeff and I met with the Saugatuck City Manager and proposed renting the Pump House for \$1 per year, the rental to be raised after the first 3 years. This was accepted. It amounted to a substantial funding of the museum by Saugatuck in terms of lost tax revenue and income from sale of the property.

Early on we had a vote at a monthly meeting as to the name of the museum. I favored "The Pump House Museum". Peg Sanford gave an emotional plug for "The Saugatuck Douglas Historical Museum." Politically this was a good choice in order to interest more Douglas people, and possibly obtain some financial support from the City of Douglas.

My vision for the museum was that it be a one show at a time space, and avoid at all cost the dusty small museum look of a clutter of everybody's cast offs. Early acquisition forms gave full rights of de acquisition to the museum. Another suggestion was that the museum be a legally separate unit from SDHS. I pointed out that eventually the museum would have to have programs, which is what SDHS already supplied.

Eventually Spring of '93 arrived and it was time to open the museum. With a budget of \$300, Stan Wilson and I order mounted blow-ups of historical photographs. With so little money, we did not order them on waterproof board, and did not realize the tremendous humidity problem with the site. Within days the exhibit was a series of wall-mounted tubes, but they lasted through an opening.

And so the Saugatuck Historical Museum was born.