



OLD SCHOOL HOUSE
HISTORY CENTER

SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS
HISTORICAL SOCIETY



SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS
HISTORY MUSEUM

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**NEW EXHIBITION AT OLD SCHOOL HOUSE HISTORY CENTER
RECALLS EARLY DAYS OF DOUGLAS UNION SCHOOL**

AUG. 19, 2016 -- A new S-D Historical Society exhibition recalling the history and significance of Douglas Union School and tracing its evolution into today's Old School House History Center, will open Saturday, August 27, 11am - 3pm, on site at 130 Center Street in Douglas.

Titled "The Happy Story Of A Douglas Landmark", the exhibition will remain open during those same hours Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays through October. Admission is free, with donations gratefully accepted to help support the Society's volunteer-based programs and exhibits.

The original school, which opened just after the American Civil War in 1866, marked a revolution in progressive public education in Michigan. The largest and most expensive building in Douglas at that time, it was called a "union" (or "consolidated") school because it brought the area's small, one-room schoolhouses together, and taught children by grade level, in a "modern" school environment, under specially trained teachers. It also offered an optional "high school" (grades 10-12) which allowed graduates to attend Michigan's public universities without entrance examinations. Although not the first union school in the state, it brought a bold new concept here and was soon followed by union schools in Saugatuck and Ganges.

Today, Douglas has the only remaining 19th century union school in Michigan, with its architecture and construction faithfully preserved as the Old School House. Its historical significance has won official recognition through listing on the State and National Register of Historic Places.

As a premiere event in transitioning the Old School House History Center into a year-round exhibition site, the new exhibit envisions the school's early days with text and images, showing classroom layouts and a collection of class photos with teachers. It reveals typical school curriculum of its time and describes how the building functioned. The school had 229 students when it opened, was using a slide projector as early as 1920, and required teachers to instruct on proper hygiene and the prevention of communicable disease.

Its last high school class appears to have graduated in 1912; thereafter, Douglas high school students went to Saugatuck or Allegan. The school's lower grades closed in 1957 and classes moved to new quarters (at first only four classrooms) on Randolph Street -- partly as a result of a general American "Cold War" fears of being overtaken by the Soviet expertise in the sciences and math.

The exhibition recalls that after the classes moved out in 1957, the building was adapted as an apartment building. In 2006, when the structure and property was in danger of being purchased for commercial purposes, the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society reached an agreement with its owner, local citizen Nancy Budd, to purchase the building, restore it, and use it for the Society's expanding community heritage programs and archives. The \$1.4 million restoration-adaptive re-use project was completed in 2009, thanks to hundreds of donor dollars and volunteer fund-raising and planning efforts.

This special School House exhibition was written, designed and installed by the Society's volunteer design team comprising Judy Hillman, Sally Winthers, Vic Bella, Kayla Britten, Kay Reckley and Steve Teich, with research completed by historians Jim Schmiechen, Marsha Kontio and Jack Sheridan. It also will introduce

new moveable exhibition display panels designed by the team and constructed by local building firm 42North Custom Homes of Holland and Saugatuck.

“The Happy Story of a Douglas Landmark” exhibit joins other new History Center exhibits featuring local area maps and the history of the Chain Ferry and Ferry Store as represented in paintings and photographs. Today, with the former schoolyard now blossomed into more than a half-acre garden and display area, including the home of America’s oldest official lifesaving “surf boat” housed within a specially sheltered shipwreck exhibit, the Old School House History Center is one of the area’s top tourist attractions.

The new exhibition adds yet another use to the Old School House History Center, centrally located in downtown Douglas. Beyond the educational opportunities listed above, the History Center is home to the Society’s archives and collections, administrative offices and summer Root Camp for kids, and provides the venue for most of the Society’s twenty “Tuesday Talks” and monthly public programs presented throughout each year. It also offers an affordable place for community groups to conduct small meetings and programs, and also hosts weddings, family reunions, business conferences and other special events.

For more information about the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society, its Museum and Old School House History Center, or its upcoming activities, visit www.sdhistoricalsociety.org.



S-DHS archive photo shows Douglas Union School as it looked about 1905.