# GAZETTE



Spring/Summer 2023 Volume 30 No. 1

## Log House Celebrates 20 Years in Crow Island Park by Joan Evanich

It is hard to believe that the Schmidt-Burnham Log House moved to Crow Island Park 20 years ago this May. Surprisingly, it was not the first time the almost 200-year-old house was moved! The hand-hewn house originally was located at the current site of the Indian Hill Golf Club and was first occupied by the Schmidt family, immigrants from Trier, Germany. Three generations of the family lived in the house beginning in 1839. They eventually remodeled their home by plastering the interior walls and covering the exterior logs with clapboard siding. The



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Log House moves west on Tower Road, 2003.

## Winnetka Woman's Club: Decades of Giving Generously and Connecting Villagers

by Holly Marihugh

Dr. Alice Barlow Brown opened her door to host the first meeting of the Winnetka Woman's Club on January 23, 1908, and only nine other women were present at the brand spanking new club. Dr. Barlow Brown went on to rescue and treat civilians in war-torn France during WWI and continued a career of medical service abroad. Those few members in her home didn't know then that the club also would have a grand future filled with hundreds of members accomplishing great things through generous philanthropy, a network of community connections, and lasting friendships.

In the 115 years since the club

Non-profit Organization U.S. Postage PAID Permit No. 27 Palatine, Illinois was created, it's given more than \$200,000 to fund college scholarships for local students, created the wildly popular "House Walk" fundraising tour around town, and welcomed many local clubs and non-profits into its classic club house that used to sit across from the Village Green.

One of the main thrusts of the club through the last few decades was to fund scholarships for students in New Trier Township. After filling in an application, students met face-to-face with club board members and shared their dreams.

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Announcing

## Stories & Structures Architectural Tour Program!

Visit the WHS website or scan the QR code to learn more about our guided, app-based, and web-based tours.



#### SAVE THE DATE

for our Annual Gala

#### School's Out: Time for a Party!

Saturday, June 24th

#### The Legacy Heritage Circle

Consider including the Winnetka Historical Society in your charitable plans through a will, trust, IRA, life insurance policy or other planned giving arrangements.

Contact Mary Trieschmann to discuss your options:

director@winnetkahistory.org

## Log House

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house sold in 1870 when part of the Schmidt family moved to Wisconsin.

Several people owned the property after the Schmidts left. Then, in 1914, local artist Anita Willets Burnham discovered the old house while on a painting excursion. The old clapboards were rotting away, and Mrs. Burnham noticed the silver logs underneath. She became obsessed with owning it and after three years of negotiations finally bought the house in 1917 for \$25. Right before the transaction was completed the land was purchased by the Indian Hill Club. If the Burnhams still wanted the house. they would have to move it, so they bought a small piece of land at the edge of the Skokie Marsh. They paid \$100 for a team of horses to pull the house to its new location on North Avenue (now Tower Road). It took three days for the three-mile trip. Alfred and Anita Burnham soon built an addition on the back of the original 1830s structure to add modern conveniences for themselves and their four children that included electricity and indoor plumbing. They also added a fireplace and built-in cabinetry in the original part of the house.

A 1941 Winnetka Talk article quoted Anita Willets Burnham saying, "it was her dream for the Winnetka Historical Society to one day own her log house." To fulfil

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Above: Lifting the Log House onto the trailer.

Left: Brothers Ron and Harold Muelfelt from J.C. Muelfelt & Sons house movers.



Above: Log House leadership committee members Joan Evanich, Nancy Judge, Ken Behles, and Louise Holland in front of the house during its move, 2003.

Left: Police escort through the Forest Preserve.



## Director's Letter

by Mary Trieschmann, WHS Executive Director

This year the Winnetka Historical Society is thrilled to bring the village's history to the public in new and exciting ways. We are partnering with the Winnetka-Northfield Public Library, Community House Winnetka, and the North Shore Senior Center on a series of traveling history exhibits that will be unveiled this summer along with fun community events and

fascinating presentations. Our Field Trip Program is expanding to bring history to life for more students with hands-on artifact discovery inside local school classrooms, at the Schmidt-Burnham Log House, and at our Museum and Headquarters at 411 Linden.

In addition, we are increasing open days at the Schmidt-Burnham Log House for the second year in a

row, opening every Sunday this year from April 30 through November 19. We are delighted to introduce a new scavenger hunt at the Log House – a favorite activity for our visitors young and young at heart!

We are also launching our new Stories and Structures Architectural Tour Program. These tours take participants through the village's historic neighborhoods and commercial districts, discussing the architectural elements that make these structures unique and sharing stories about the people who lived and worked in them.

We are offering multiple in-person guided tours this spring and summer, starting with a 1-hour Central Winnetka Architectural Treasures Walking Tour on April 13, and a 1-hour Hubbard Woods Architectural Treasures Jogging Tour on May 13. More guided tour dates will continue to be added, so be sure to check our website for more information! In addition, our app and web-based tours through PocketSights allow participants to walk, jog, bike, or drive the tours on their own, or take the tours virtually right from their computer or smartphone.

Finally, this *Gazette* issue focuses on the people and organizations that have contributed to the village's history in important ways over time. From the dubious business practices of early developer E. Ashley Mears to the many contributions of several of Winnetka's incredible women, this issue is sure to entertain!

## Fortune, Corruption, and Sham Mansions: The Story of E. Ashley Mears

by Meagan McChesney, PhD WHS Curator

After the Great Chicago Fire destroyed much of Chicago in 1871, thousands of urbanites flocked to the North Shore looking for a fresh start. While many saw this population boom as an opportunity to expand Winnetka's tight-knit community, others sought ways to take advantage of newcomers. Chicago banker and realtor E. Ashley Mears was one of such swindlers. While Mears helped initiate Winnetka's real estate boom, he ultimately put the village's reputation – and the security of many of its residents – at risk. So how did such a character make his way to Winnetka? Here's the story.

E. Ashley Mears was born in Vermont in 1840. He moved to Chicago at a young age, where he first became a stove manufacturer before attending law school and later, diving into banking. In 1869, Mears married Margaret Everts and had 6 children. One of their children, Henrietta, later rose to fame as the author of popular evangelical Christian books.

By the time his children were born, Mears had made a fortune as a banker. Never one to be satisfied, he quickly started using his newly found wealth to fund various ventures in real estate. After the fire, Mears recognized that Winnetka was on the cusp of a real estate boom and saw an opportunity to enhance his fortune. He purchased several plots of land and in the early-to-mid 1870s, built fourteen imposing mansions.

While impressive in stature with unique architectural features on the outside, none of the mansions were complete by the time they were sold. Most were sold as a shell of a house, and a poorly constructed one at that. According to Village Engineer Frank Windes, the mansions were "cheaply constructed and could hardly stand by themselves when a stiff wind struck them."

Mears had a hard time selling some of the mansions. Many of the homeowners that did purchase a Mears mansion could not afford to



The Willson house, c. 1900.

complete the houses, and had to sell or vacate the house due to a lack of insulation during Winnetka's bitter cold winters. "They were colder than barns," Windes explained.

Mears, under scrutiny for his "loose" business practices and "shaky" banking methods, left Chicago and opened several banks in North Dakota. There, he was investigated for fraud and after losing much of his fortune in the Panic of 1893, moved his family to Minneapolis. Mears died in Minnesota a poor man on May 4, 1912.

Many of Mears' Winnetka mansions, known as the "sham mansions," fared little better than their developer. Many of the "shell-like" houses were vacant for years, becoming homes to rats, mice, and other unpleasant intruders. Others were torn down, or worse – engulfed in fire (at least 3 suffered this fate). Some that were finished and inhabited seemed cursed. One Mears mansion, for example, became the site of a tragic crime when former Village President James Willson and his wife were brutally murdered inside the home in 1884. The Willson house was moved from its original location near the tracks between Cherry and Ash to the southwest corner of Pine and Green Bay in 1910, where it remained until it was torn down in 1962.

## Winnetka's Woman's Club cont. from page 1



Winnetka Woman's Club building, c. 1916.

"Meeting these students and seeing the talent in the community was amazing," Marla Bagan says, who served as board president for three separate one-year terms. "We based our selections on academic achievement, need-based factors, and community involvement. Some of these kids had established not-for-profits on their own. You'd come out of those student interviews and feel like, the future's going to be good."

To fund those scholarships, the club pulled off a magic trick of grand proportions every year when it invited local folks to showcase their homes to the public through a House Walk. That meant that up to 300 visitors could walk in the front door and tour just about every room of a featured house. In its final three years (2017-2019), the House Walk brought in over \$115,000. Dozens of volunteer docents signed up to host, local retailers donated design services and flowers, and Winnetka police officers directed traffic while visitors navigated the route.

The club's iconic Victorian meeting house sat across from the Village Green at the corner of Maple and Oak for more than 100 years. The Woman's Club bought it in 1911 for \$6,200 from a local men's club that could no longer meet the mortgage. The club house became the center of an overflowing number of community connections throughout the decades.

"We donated the club space to



Former WWC President Marla Bagan (left) and LeAnita Ragland-Brooks who also served as club president and chaired the Silver Wicket Fundraiser.

lots of organizations for their fundraising, which helped everybody," Marla Bagan says. "The Boy Scouts used the ballroom for whatever event they wanted to sell tickets to. School PTOs, Family Service of Winnetka-Northfield, Winnetka Youth Organization, Women's Exchange, Veteran's Day groups, and many others all used it. It was free space. Instead of having to rent a room somewhere they could meet in a really nice local space, which helped their bottom line."

With the turn of the century in 2000, club members found that even though the organization was a

501(c)(3) non-profit, paying hefty real estate taxes on the club house persisted and became a thorn in the side.

When a large chunk of the club's fundraising began to be targeted only at the tax bill, club members saw the writing on the wall. They wanted to keep giving but would have to find a less expensive location. The grand Victorian club building, built in the 1890s, was sold to a property developer and faced the wrecking ball in 2015. The club continued to glide along, hosting the final House Walk in

2019 and continuing to shake hands with and give scholarships to worthy students. However, the global covid pandemic did the club no favors, and with membership rolls continuing to dwindle, members decided to close the club's doors permanently in 2022. The club then opened its philanthropic bank vault and emptied it, giving to many local organizations.

"We weren't getting new members and to keep this club going, we would have had to get younger moms," Bagan says. "But we had this significant amount of money that we could disperse. We said, let's continue on through our gifts to other organizations. Then they can continue the good work that they're doing. You want to go out on a high note."

The following local organizations received a total of \$500,000 from The Winnetka Woman's Club at the end of 2022: New Trier High School Scholarship Trust (which will fund two scholarships every year in perpetuity), Community House Winnetka, Winnetka Parks Foundation, Winnetka Historical Society, Women's Exchange, New Trier Angel Fund, and several nonprofits chosen by club members.



Over the years, many community groups enjoyed the open-door policy to use WWC's grand ballroom for their programs, including these local veterans.

## Few but Mighty: Women Village Presidents

Starting in 1915 – two years after Illinois passed women's voting, but five years before the 19th Amendment – each Winnetka Village Council included at least one woman trustee.



Gwen Trindl, c. 1980s.

In 1980 Gwen Trindl broke the glass ceiling to become the first woman Village President. Gwen was an experienced hand, who served on most village commissions and boards before joining the Village Council. During her term, McDonald's was approved and the Winnetka prohibition on alcohol sales ended.

As President of the Northwest Municipal Conference, Gwen was an early advocate for creating PACE (the suburban bus and regional transit part of the RTA), and became a board member of two regional transit boards and chair of the Cook County Council of Mayors.

Gwen was an independent facilitator for non-profits. With a leadership style that was firm yet consultative, she brought everyone on board during difficult conversations.

In 2016 the Chamber of Commerce honored Gwen with its first-ever Lifetime Achievement award.

Clarine Hall served on the Village Council with Gwen for four years before being elected Village President in 1985.

Mid-career, Clarine earned an MBA from University of Chicago in the XP program, which required classroom work on weekends. She served on the boards of the Chicago Symphony, the Landmarks Preservation Council of Illinois and was Executive Director with the Northwest Suburban Council of Girl Scouts of America.

As Supervisor of New Trier Township, an elected position, Clarine recruited North Shore police chiefs to support a youth peer jury program, which started in 1998. "Anytime you can keep a juvenile out of court, give them a second chance and make the mistake a learning process, they're stronger," she said.

Jeanne Bradner, having served as a Village Trustee from 1979-1982, was elected as Village President in 1989. By this time, she was an established political hand.

She had been recruited to run in the 1978 Republican primary for the State Senate challenging Roger Keats. Jeanne worked for Senator Charles Percy, was John Anderson's Illinois Presidential campaign manager, and served as a delegate to the 1980 Republican National Convention where she led the floor fight against Reagan's conservative platform. Having served in both the Thompson and Bush administrations, Jeanne became a nationally known expert in the 1990s on volunteer and non-profit management and authored books and articles on volunteerism.



Louise Holland, 2015. Photo courtesy of Holly Marihugh.

Louise Holland also volunteered both in Winnetka and outside the village for decades. In 1997, she was elected as Winnetka's fourth woman Village President. She was a strong voice for local retailing, historic preservation and helping introduce recycling to the village. Louise chaired nearly every non-profit board in town.

Her years as Village President saw the completion of the Comprehensive Plan and the classically styled Elm St. bridge. Post-presidency Louise became co-president of the Winnetka Historical Society during complicated years that led to opening two vintage buildings to the public. She chaired both the Landmark Preservation Commission and the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

In 2018 the Chamber of Commerce honored Louise with a Lifetime Achievement Award.

Jessica Tucker served on Village Council during 2004-07 and was elected Village President in 2009. A University of Michigan grad and a law school grad, Jessica brought her legal background to the job.

Notable outside events demanded the Council's attention, including the 2008-09 recession and a 100-yr rain event that flooded a large part of the community. These led to searching for fiscal efficiencies with other taxing entities and tackling stormwater management. As President, Jessica also supported the business districts and streetscape improvements. As part of the Northwest Municipal Conference Jessica traveled to Springfield several times to advocate for Winnetka.

Winnetka has benefited in all areas (governmental and non-profit) from volunteer service by its residents. Across all boards, women have made a distinctive contribution to that legacy. Winnetka's women Village Presidents were particularly energetic and devoted.

### Sham Mansions cont. from page 3

Today, only two of the Mears "sham mansions" survive, one of which stands at 788 Walden. Lucy Fairfield Furness purchased the home from Mears in 1881. Furness may have struggled to finish the house, and in 1885, sold it to the Heinig family, who completed the sham mansion and lived there for 70 years. Unlike the other ill-fated "sham mansions," 788 Walden has benefitted from the care of its owners, and will hopefully remain standing in Winnetka for many years to come.

Interested in learning more about 788 Walden and several of Winnetka's architectural treasures? Visit our website to learn about our new walking, jogging, driving, and app-based tours! ■



Land ownership map showing land owned by E. Ashley Mears approximately where 788 Walden is located today, 1880s. Credit: Library of Congress.

### **Log House** cont. from page 2



Log House moving past the Skokie Lagoons.

her mother's wish, Burnham's youngest daughter, Ann Burnham Smith, contacted the Winnetka Historical Society in 1997 to see if it had any interest in owning and preserving her family home. The WHS board was highly enthusiastic, and focus groups were conducted with leaders of the community. Once village interest was garnered, it was decided that the Society would accept Mrs. Smith's offer of the log house.

During the next few years, home visits were made to Mrs. Smith by board and staff members to learn more about the family and the history of the house. Because the house was to be given to the Society without the attached land, a feasibility study for moving

the house had to be conducted. Inspections took place and an all-clear pronouncement was given by State Historian Ron Nelson. The house was officially bequeathed to WHS when Ann Burnham Smith passed away in 2001. A myriad of artworks and personal effects of the Burnham family were also part of the gift. These items were carefully catalogued by WHS staff and moved to safe storage at the museum at 411 Linden.

Once the house was cleared, WHS researched and hired a house mover, J. C. Muehlfelt & Sons of Wheaton, Illinois. Preparation for the move took almost a month. First a trench was dug around the house to expose the foundation and several holes were cut through the basement walls enabling access for the house jacks and metal beams required to lift the 26' x 32' structure.

In the meantime, the Crow Island location had its own challenges. The new site was in a floodplain and a former trash dump was located under the house's proposed location. These discoveries required partnerships with FEMA and the EPA. Eventually all drainage issues were addressed with the installation of drainage pipes in a swale near the house. Compensatory storage was created to make up for earth removed by a new foundation. All debris consisting of cans and bottles was removed and new clean soil was returned to the site. Everything was finally in place.

Moving day arrived on May 6, 2003, and what a beautiful, sunny day it was! The noise level was quite high as news helicopters hovered overhead. Police provided crowd control for the hundreds of excited spectators including school children, parents, neighbors, television reporters and cameras. A loud cheer broke out at approximately 9:00 am as the 75-ton log house was pulled onto Tower Road. The house was preceded by two tree trimming bucket trucks as it slowly eased its way west. A large tree limb threatened to slow down the process, but the ingenious house movers deflated the trailer tires just enough to squeak past the last obstacle and we all took a deep breath of relief. With tires reinflated, the house continued its

journey toward Forest Way Drive.

The Log House Committee walked with the house as it slowly turned south onto Forest Way Drive. Our police escort closed off the street making this leg of the trip very quiet and peaceful in comparison to all the exuberance of Tower Road. Things got lively again once we turned east onto Willow Road - we were almost there! An even larger crowd excitedly watched as we entered Crow Island Park around noon. The house movers made a huge circle with their truck to make sure it was exactly in the correct position (thoughtfully chosen by Ken Behles to not be on a "grid" with the road).

After years of anticipation and planning, Anita Willets Burnham's dream of WHS ownership and sharing of the Log House was being fulfilled. Almost all of the Log House move was privately funded through a capital campaign led by volunteers Jim Hansen and Steve Adams. The ambitious plan could not have succeeded without the partnership of the Village, Park District, District 36, the members, board and staff of WHS and the generous people of Winnetka. There was still a lot of work to be done in preparation for our future guests. We were driven to succeed by recalling Anita's inspiring words, "Doing what can't be done is the glory of living!" ■



## Volunteers Needed at the Schmidt-Burnham Log House

Interested in volunteering at one of the oldest houses in Cook County and engaging visitors in explorations, scavenger hunts and outdoor pioneer games?

Volunteers facilitate Sundays from 1:30-4:15 pm, April 30 through November 19 for at least six dates throughout the year.

For more information and to sign up, scan the QR code or visit:

winnetkahistory.org/support/ Questions? Call (847) 446-0001 or email programs@winnetkahistory.org



## WHS Will Miss Longtime Board Member

by Helen Weaver

After almost 20 years playing a variety of key roles longtime Winnetka Historical Society Board Member Christine Murdoch has hung up her WHS hat and retired from the board. Christine joined WHS in 2004, after the Schmidt Burnham Log House's move to the Crow Island woods, just in time to become one of the first docents when the Log House opened as a museum in 2006.

Christine, who has an undergraduate degree in history, loves antiques, and was a former United Nations tour guide, was the perfect person to join a group, led by then WHS Executive Director Joan Evanich, tasked with developing the costumed docent program in place at the log house for the next 15+ years.

Christine remembers well the challenges facing the team. "Shortly after it was moved, there was work to do documenting the Schmidt-Burnham history and then fleshing out what details would be included in the tours. We wanted to include school children of all ages, and since Winnetka's curriculum includes Pioneer Days, Immigration, and the Civil War we developed programs for all of them. It was a bit of baptism by fire learning what worked and what didn't."

Like the other Log House docents, Christine wore a custom-made era appropriate costume to give tours and support local events including the village's Fourth of July Parade. "You really appreciate the inconveniences of what our predecessors had to endure walking in the sweltering sun from Skokie School to the Village Green in a tight cotton dress with a cotton slip and apron." According to Evanich, "Christine was definitely one of the children's favorite docents. She created a first-person interpretation of Peter Schmidt, Jr.'s wife Cecelia, complete with a German accent. It really brought life to the children's Log House experience."

Log House docent Jude Offerle remembers the fun she and Christine would have impersonating early Winnetka residents during the school group tours. "Christine would always welcome the children into the Log House in German. One day, a child even started speaking German to her. Another time she made me laugh out loud when she answered a child's question about the Schmidt's journey to the new world with a comment about 'Die Disney Cruise.""

Though still involved with the Log House Christine took on a new role in 2015 when the treasurer position opened up. Her background working in concert finance at Radio City Music Hall convinced the board to elect her for the job. Christine comments: "It took a lot of hours behind the computer working on budgets, balancing the books each month and providing reports to the board and donors, but in the end it was so gratifying. To be on the ground floor of this amazing organization and watching it grow has been truly rewarding."

Former WHS Executive Director Patti Van Cleave reports: "Working with Christine was wonderful! As an executive director, one hopes for a treasurer that has a good grasp of the budget and expenses. Christine got it." Current ED Mary Trieschmann agrees: "Christine wholeheartedly supported me in my role as executive



Christine Murdoch in docent's clothing at the Log House opening, 2006.

director. She was able to give me true insight into our bookkeeping system and we worked together to craft a budget each year that was always spot-on. She will be missed by many but especially by me."

The Winnetka Historical Society is truly grateful for the dedicated support of volunteers like Christine and we wish her well in her new endeavors.

The Winnetka Historical Society is a non-profit 501c-3 organization and is primarily funded by individuals.

You can help preserve our history by making a donation today.

**THANK YOU!** 

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