



# The Crackerbarrel

VOLUME 48 NUMBER 4

JULY 2011



## Greetings from the President

*George Rowe, President*

We have been busy busy busy. Liz was in Europe for two weeks, and we have felt the weight of all she does. We cannot thank David Siegenthaler enough for his efforts.

The Adirondack chair project worked out splendidly. The city this year chose chairs to be decorated and displayed. I was able to find a local artist who accepted the commission and executed it in great style. We have a Victorian lady having a picnic, checking the time on her Elgin watch. I love it! Katherine says it is in the "Steampunk" genre. If anyone knows what that is, let me know. Katherine has a blog and wrote a few articles about the process of developing the chair design. You can check out her blog at [katguevara@gmail.com](mailto:katguevara@gmail.com). The chair is now sitting comfortably outside the Museum's front door.

Museum Educator Lucy Elliott organized another exhibit for the Museum at the Gail Borden Library for "Bike to Work Week." Lucy rounded up two "Elgin" bicycles to display along with some great pictures and info. The bikes were donated for the display by Steve Thoren and Jeff White. Steve's bike dates from the 1920s and was made in Elgin (look for more "Elgin" bike info at the upcoming Brown Bag Lunch in August). Jeff's bike was sold through Sears, made by Columbia, and named "Elgin" to cash in on the name's reputation for quality. Great bicycle display by a local "sparkplug." Lucy also worked on the new bicycle map of Elgin, linking the museums and other local landmarks. The city is interested in using our map to distribute in the school district.

The Society is making an effort to get into video. You can see Bill Briska on YouTube giving a tour of the watch room. Search [www.YouTube.com](http://www.YouTube.com) for "Briska Watch Factory Exhibit Tour." The video of Bill was shot by Terry Gable. We also have a YouTube video linked to our Facebook page on the 1920 tornado that

ripped through Elgin. The interview, featuring Rowena Swan recounting the day, was shot by Phil Broxham.

Programs are one of the best features of the Museum and David Nelson continues to keep our interest. Our 50th anniversary program on May 14 featured Mike Alft speaking on his new book *A History of Elgin History*. Newly elected Elgin mayor Dave Kaptain spoke on the significance of the Watch Factory Bell. Members of the Elgin Masonic Lodge were in attendance to mark the placing of their cornerstone in the artifact garden.

Museum Director Liz Marston has been working to get signage completed for the garden. She was able to enlist the efforts of Eagle Scout candidate Hayden Pierce to place the signage in the garden in time for the event. Many thanks to Liz and Hayden.

The Fox Valley Men of Harmony entertained at a recent brown bag lunch and they were excellent, offering great music intertwined with bits of local history. Our next Brown Bag Lunch is about Elgin in the 1950s, so please check the date. Don't miss that one.

It promises to be an exciting summer. Hope to see you at the museum.



## The Crackerbarrel

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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.  
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 Visit our website [www.elginhistory.org](http://www.elginhistory.org)

Opinions expressed herein are not necessarily those of the Society's Board of Directors.

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## Upcoming Programs for 2011

*David Nelson, Program Director*

Check our website for the latest details.  
<http://www.elginhistory.org/events.html>

**Thursday, July 21, 12 Noon**

**Brown Bag Lunch: Elgin in the 1950s with Jerry Turnquist**

**Thursday, August 18, 12 Noon**

**Brown Bag Lunch: History of the Bicycle Industry in Elgin with Tom Armstrong**

**Sunday, September 25, 11 A.M. - 3:30 P.M.**

**Elgin Historic Cemetery Walk at Bluff City Cemetery**

**Sunday, October 16, 3 P.M.**

**Civil War Nurse Clara Barton**

Refreshments will be served and ladies are encouraged to wear hats as Leslie Goddard reprises nurse Clara Barton. *Reservations required*

**Sunday, November 6, 4 P.M.**

**Museum Benefit and Silent Auction**

Bucky Halker portrays Woody Guthrie

**Saturday, December 3, 1 P.M.**

**Annual Holiday Tea**

Heartland Voices Ensemble will perform, directed by John Slawson.

## Welcome New Members

- **Britta and Andrew Cuming**—New life members!
- **Chris and Carl Missele**
- **Tony Morrisroe**
- **Sally Schick**

## Summer Interns Help at the Museum

*Rebecca Marco, Editor*

This summer we have two interns helping at the Museum. Katie Dickey is working on new exhibit that will showcase the history of pharmacies in Elgin. It just might include mention of the legendary Burn's Malt!

She is also compiling a list of dairies/creameries that made Elgin the dairy capital it once was. The list is growing!

Christine Holthus is working with Steve Stroud on house research, potentially for a database. Christine also helped Joyce Pellicore type an addendum for our docent guide. She also shadowed Jennifer Fritz-Williams.

Both interns have also been most helpful as docents.

## Calendar Fundraising Project Underway

*Rebecca Marco, Editor*

Longtime Society member and volunteer Carol Zamie is working on a 2012 calendar featuring images of Elgin in the 1950s. The calendars will be ready in September and will be offered for sale in the Museum Store and around Elgin. They will also be sold at the annual Gifford Park Association Housewalk and of course at our Cemetery Walk in September. The images in the calendar are from the Museum's photo collections. All proceeds will go to the Society. Many thanks to Carol for undertaking this project, and to Terry Gable for underwriting it.

## Open House was Well-Attended

*Rebecca Marco, Editor*

In honor of the Society's 50th anniversary and Preservation Month, an open house was held at the Museum on May 14 to dedicate the artifact garden and to introduce Mike Alft's new book, *A History of Elgin History*. Though the artifact garden dedication took place indoors due to uncooperative weather, the event was well-attended. Elgin's new mayor, Dave Kaptain, was the featured speaker. He emphasized the importance

of community involvement in making a city work, as well as the importance of retaining our city's historic buildings.



*Elgin historian and author Mike Alft with two antique Elgin bicycles.*



*George Rowe and a member of the Elgin Masonic Lodge enjoy the artifact garden despite the blustery weather.*

Mr. Alft spoke on the history of EAHS, of which he is a charter member. He described the founding of the Society in 1961. Charter Member Richard Bennett also spoke briefly.

Items in the artifact garden include the Elgin National Watch Company factory bell, the cornerstone from the Elgin Masonic Temple, and Civil War cannons. The

garden is enhanced with signage, brick walkways, and beautiful landscaping maintained by the Elgin Garden Club

The Museum recently worked with the city on the BikeCHAIN project, creating a bicycle map showing the locations of historic sites and museums in Elgin, and in honor of that, antique bicycles were displayed. Board member Dennis Roxworthy kindly loaned a beautifully restored antique bike for display, and Steve Thorens also loaned an unrestored bike made in Elgin. Many thanks to both for lending us their bikes to help make the day a success.

Mr. Alft (also an avid bike rider for many years) signed copies of his new book following the presentation. The book is available for sale in the Museum Store.

### **Memorial Donations for Chuck Emmert**

A number of people donated to the Museum in memory of Museum supporter Chuck Emmert, who passed away recently. Please see the article about Chuck in this issue

- Sara Ellen Anderson
- Donna and Harry Barnes
- Jeanne and Richard Breslich
- Betty Brown
- Peter and Elizabeth Cappas
- Helen and Steve Childs
- Barry and Andrea Danielson
- Albert and Pam Degan
- William and Kay Diamond
- Beverly Dillon
- LaVerne Finney
- Mildred and Richard Fricke
- Carol Graeff
- Joyce Hopper
- Vivian Iverson
- Claire Johannesen
- Betty Klink
- Don and Pat Laird
- Richard Marblestone
- W. R. Meadows
- Robert Passaneau
- PEO Sisterhood
- Tom and Sue Rakow
- Coral Reinert
- William and Margarete Schmoltdt
- John and Marlene Shales
- Carol Shidler
- Charles and Joan Stevenson
- Richard and Elaine Stolt

- Gayle Strohmaier
- John and Katherine Traeger
- Todd and Kathryn Turner
- Marilyn Wilharm
- Mary and John Williams
- Debra and Roland Witte
- Seena Wolaben

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## Other Donations

- BikeCHAIN Project Maps: \$78
- Grindstone Video Project: \$290
- David Siegenthaler: Bookmark Project, printing
- Richard Renner: EAHS 50th Anniversary Project; filming costs

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## Kenosha Civil War Museum Trip

*Rebecca Marco, Editor*

On June 4 a number of us drove to Kenosha to visit the Civil War Museum. Located on the lakefront, the museum is housed in a new structure located on the site of the former Simmons mattress factory.

The museum is located next to the Kenosha Natural History Museum, and offers an experiential view of Civil War times. Because no battles were fought near Kenosha, the museum instead focuses on what life was like during the Civil War years and tells the stories of individuals who fought as well as those who remained behind in the towns and villages. Lifelike mannequins located in realistic settings tell their stories to visitors who approach.

The weekend of our trip, the museum also featured a model railroad exhibition in the lobby and had a feature on female clothing fashion throughout the 19th century. The museum had something for everyone, including beautiful views of the lakefront from the rooftop. We found a brief mention of Elgin and other Illinois regiments among the exhibit descriptions, which are cleverly written as though they are newspaper articles from the era.

Downtown Kenosha has an old-fashioned electric trolley, featuring four beautifully restored trolley cars from the 1950s, that carries passengers from the lakefront to the train station and all points between. The Elgin contingent had lunch at Tenuta's, a great Italian deli and grocery store. Everyone enjoyed the day. Many thanks to David Nelson for planning the trip.



*Elgin Historical Society members at the Kenosha Civil War Museum*

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## In Memoriam: Chuck Emmert

*David Siegenthaler*



Charles F. "Chuck" Emmert passed away on April 8, 2011. He is survived by his wife Judy, daughters Jennifer and Valerie, son Tom and sister Lois. He was born in Elgin on January 22, 1928, to Ralph and Helen Emmert. Chuck left us many autobiographical articles which he had written over the past 15 years or so. This two-part biography is based mostly on his own reminiscences.

Ralph Emmert, Chuck's dad, worked at the Elgin National Watch Company from 1919 until his death in 1964, except for two years during the Great Depression when he was laid off. Ralph would become a very active member of the Universalist Church. He became its choir director, organ repairman, janitor and trustee. The Universalist Church had a liberal philosophy that often frustrated Chuck. As a trustee, Ralph was instrumental in hiring three of its pastors. One of them, according to Chuck, had extreme leftist political and social views. He saw old friends leave the church and new people join who had no interest in religion, but were there to push "radical" political agendas. Ralph was a strong conservative, according to Chuck, and always voted Republican, but he had no problem with an intellectual religious liberalism. In fact, Ralph avidly studied world religions and refused Chuck's repeated urging to leave the Church. Due to loyalty to

his parents, Chuck did not leave the Church, either. He was married in the Universalist Church and his three children were baptized there. On Sundays, though, he "began worshipping on the golf course."

Helen Ott Emmert, Chuck's mom, was a flutist with the Elgin Little Symphony in the mid-1920s, where she met Ralph, a clarinet and saxophone player. They were married in 1926 and had two children: Chuck in January 1928 and Lois in December 1929. In 1951, Helen became a charter member of the Elgin Symphony Orchestra. Helen was also a charter member of the Elgin chapter of the Red Cross organization called the "Gray Ladies" that formed in 1939. As a "Gray Lady" she was in charge of musical therapy at the Elgin State Hospital, and later at Hines Veterans Hospital. Helen passed away in 1995.

Chuck's musical interests were instilled in him by his parents. His Dad supported the family during the Depression by playing in a dance band at area road-houses. His mom played flute and piano, worked for many years as a volunteer music therapist and was a member of several music organizations. His sister Lois was a soprano soloist and the whole family sang in the church choir, where his dad was director.

As a child, Chuck had lessons in piano, drums and bass violin. In high school, Chuck played in the band and the orchestra and also taught himself to play the saxophone and tuba. At age 16, he became a member of the musician's union and was playing in a popular dance band.

In 1943, as a sophomore in high school, he watched a handball tournament at the YMCA. It looked like fun and he started playing the game, usually against an active group of older men. He soon became obsessed with the sport, playing with the best players at the YMCA in an effort to improve. He was invited to play in the "Y" league and competed against other YMCA teams from around the Chicago area.

Also while in high school, Chuck enjoyed swimming and diving at the YMCA and Wing Park pools, and at the South Elgin quarry. He saw an excellent diver named Don Kienlen and tried to emulate him. Even with Don's instruction, Chuck never became a proficient diver, but Don introduced him to an excellent clown diver named Dix Dewey. Dix and Chuck formed a clown diving team and were paid for exhibitions on Sunday afternoons at the South Elgin quarry.

Chuck's love of fishing began as a youth with his Uncle Shelby Emmert, his Dad's brother, who had two daughters and no sons. Chuck's Dad enjoyed fishing, too, but had little free time. Uncle Shelby was a milkman, so his workday was usually over by 1:30 pm. He and Chuck would often go fishing after school, even in winter, when they ice-fished.

For one year in high school, at age 16, Chuck worked at the watch factory after school and on Saturdays, making him a third-generation watch worker. His grandfather, Fred Ott, and his dad had both worked there. Chuck worked in the spring department, grinding annealing off of mainsprings. He had to wear a cloth mask, dip the springs into a pot of emery dust and lard oil, fan the ends of the springs over a steel block, and grind them. He would come home "looking like the end man in a minstrel show."

Chuck graduated from high school in January 1946, "in the upper two-thirds" of his class. He enlisted in the Army in March 1946 for an 18-month hitch. After basic training, he passed a tryout and was accepted into the famous 100-piece Army Ground Forces Band of Washington, D.C. The band included a symphony orchestra, a chorus and a chamber music group, and Chuck was in all of them. The band regularly traveled around the country on recruiting and good-will tours. Chuck succeeded in getting Elgin included in one of their Midwestern tours and in April 1947 the band performed at the Elgin High School gym. The audience jammed the gym to capacity and several hundred could not be seated.

Discharged from the Army in the fall of 1947, Chuck decided to use his GI Bill benefits and go to college. He had been inspired to pursue higher education by Dr. George LaPoint, a minister his church had hired about 1945. Dr. LaPoint was a former university professor who went into the ministry for time to write. He had lived in the Emmert home for six months until his family could be moved to Elgin, and his stories fascinated Chuck.

Chuck graduated from the University of Illinois at Champaign in 1951 with majors in both geology and zoology, and with a graduate course in ichthyology (the study of fishes).

While in college, Chuck continued to perform in dance bands and regularly participated in jam sessions with other jazz musicians on campus. During the summer of 1949, "in a frightful display of overconfidence," Chuck attempted to start a small summer symphony in Elgin. He gathered together about 35 musicians for five rehearsals, but they never felt ready to perform publicly and disbanded when Chuck returned to school.

After graduating from college in June 1951, Chuck joined the new Elgin Civic Symphony (re-named Elgin Symphony Orchestra in 1957). The orchestra had just had their first concert two months before. Chuck would play string bass in the Elgin Symphony Orchestra for the next 21 years, and was elected orchestra president twice.

Also while in college, Chuck would resume his obsession with handball. In 1951 he won the singles and doubles University of Illinois handball championships. A couple of years after college, he began playing with Don Kienlen, the diver who befriended him years earlier. Don would become his handball mentor and doubles partner, and together they would win many tournaments throughout the Midwest from the 1950s to the 1970s. In 1959, Chuck joined the Union League Club of Chicago after visiting the club and seeing their handball courts.

*To be continued in the September Crackerbarrel.....*

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## Not Too Late to Sign Up the Kids

*Lucy Elliott, Museum Educator*

We still have openings for the August session of Elgin Junior Tour Guides program for kids in grades 2 through 5. The program gives kids a blast from the past while introducing them to our local history in a fun, hands-on way.

Day 1 features Early Elgin, Agriculture, and the founding families of Elgin. Day 2 covers the city's growth and the various types of architecture. The new architectural exhibit shows kids how to identify architectural features that can be found throughout Elgin. Day 3 is about Elgin watches and local industry, and focuses on the role of women. Day 4 includes the railroads and dairy industry.

We encourage you to enroll interested children soon!

### Session B (4 days)

August 8, 9, 10, and 11, 9:30 A.M. TO Noon

Fee: \$65 per child

Each day will include hands-on activities. Please contact Lucy, Under the Cupola, at 847-742-4248 to sign up or for more information.

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## Brown Bag Lunch Fun

*Rebecca Marco, Editor*

Our recent Brown Bag Lunch featured The Fox Valley Men of Harmony, a barbershop-style singing group. They provided tidbits of local history along with their fine singing, and the event was well-attended.

In the bicycle theme, our Aug. 18 Brown Bag Lunch will feature information about Elgin bicycles. We hope you will join us then and on July 21, to hear about Elgin in the 1950s.



*Fox Valley Men of Harmony at the Museum*

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## Things Made in Elgin

*Rebecca Marco, Editor*

In honor of National Preservation Month, Society members participated in an Elgin Alive! program at Gail Borden library, featuring things made in Elgin. Members of the public were encouraged to bring items they've collected bearing the Elgin name, and our experts were there to help identify the items and provide history on each.

Several Society collectors participated, including Jeff White (all things Elgin) Jeff Biss (Elgin postcards) and Patricia Harkin of Elgin Antiques and Uniques, who gave an interesting talk on collectible Elgin compacts and ladies' makeup trends in general. The compacts were made by the Illinois Watch Case Company formerly located at Dundee and Slade Avenues (the building is currently being demolished, though some materials are being salvaged).



*Bill Briska introduces the program at the library.*

The public brought in many interesting items, including original architectural blueprints, every old-house dweller's dream find.



*Original house plans found in a basement*



*Rick Wagner of Elgin's Rediscover Records store presents a collectible.*



*Many interesting Elgin products were brought in.*

## Collections Corner

*Elizabeth Marston, Museum Director*

The Society was the recent recipient of some unique donated items. We recently received a framed stained glass image of old Elgin City Hall, created in 2004 by Jay Hagstrom and Robert Pudelwitts for the Elgin City Employees Credit Union. This lovely piece is now hanging in the Museum's meeting room.



*Old Elgin City Hall, rendered in stained glass*

Susan Wildemuth donated more LeeWards/Dexter Thread items to enhance the new exhibit on LeeWards Kit Quilts opening in September.



*LeeWards embroidery kit item*



And, from the Gage Family Historical Collection courtesy of Larry Gage, is this Modern Woodman ribbon and one-room schoolhouse image from 1904 in Plato Center.



*One Room Schoolhouse of Plato Center, 1904*



*Modern Woodman Ribbon, courtesy of the Gage Family, and Dexter Yarn Company packaging from Susan Wildemuth*