



# The Crackerbarrel

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## A Close Call from Elgin's Past

*Chuck Emmert*

At 4:20 am on October 13, 1938, a huge steam locomotive hauling 100 empty freight cars on the Milwaukee Railroad blew up at Almora, just three miles northwest of Elgin near the current Big Timber Metra station. One man from Elgin, brakeman George Hachtel, was killed, as were the engineer and the fireman, who were from Chicago. Two men riding in the caboose escaped with minor injuries and shock. The explosion hurled massive pieces of debris as far as 1,000 feet.

The true cause was never determined, but several theories were advanced. "Low water" was a possibility, as the engine was heard slowly puffing near the top of the grade, which was one of the longest and steepest in this part of Illinois. Some felt the engineer might have tried to coax the engine over the grade without adding water from the tender, fearing that adding cold water would reduce his head of steam in the boiler and result in a loss of power. Normally, a train of this length required two engines to get up the grade if the cars were loaded; 99 empty cars was the approximate maximum load for one engine.

From the terrific blast, the entire boiler and cab were blown off the tracks. The boiler, which weighed 22 tons, was hurled forward. It landed nose down on the eastbound tracks about 200 feet west of the trucks (the wheel assembly), and then bounded another 200 feet before coming to a stop. The overhead boiler coils were torn out and tossed an additional 200 feet further west. Other smaller pieces of debris were blown into the fields at the side of the tracks.

The trucks of the locomotive were derailed and overturned just west of where they were when the explosion occurred. The engine cab was blown toward the rear of the train, landing about eight car lengths in back of the coal tender.

Just think! What if the explosion had occurred just five or ten minutes earlier, when the train was passing through downtown Elgin? Even worse, what would it have been like if it had happened at the city gas tank located next to the tracks near the National Street bridge?



*Train Wreck near Almora (Courier-News Photo cn2359)*



*The Overturned Boiler Amid Twisted Rails (cn2359)*

## The Crackerbarrel

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The Crackerbarrel welcomes reader contributions.  
Next deadline April 20, 2011

 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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**Thursday, June 16, 12 Noon**

**Brown Bag Lunch: Elgin Barbershop Quartet Performs at the Museum**

**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, 12 Noon - 3:30 p.m.**

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

**Sunday, October 16, 3 p.m.**

**Ladies' Afternoon Tea with Clara Barton**

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

**Sunday, November 6, 1 p.m.**

**Annual Brunch 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.

## Upcoming Programs for 2011

*David Nelson, Program Director*

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

**Sunday, March 13, 1 p.m.**

**Elgin: 1870-1910 Exhibit Opening**

Historic Cooking in 1900 Program with Elizabeth Carlson. Free Admission.

**Sunday, April 17, 12-3 p.m.**

**Civil War 150th Anniversary**

Meet Mary Todd Lincoln reprised by Pam Thiel and visit a Civil War Muster Encampment with Ken Gough. Also, a new diorama of the Battle of Shiloh will be unveiled by Don Pielin.

**Saturday, May 14, 1 p.m.**

**50th Anniversary of the Elgin Historical Society**

Mike Alft presents his new book *The History of History in Elgin*. Dedication of the of Artifact Garden and kick-off for the Elgin Bikechain Project, with a guided bicycle tour of Elgin's east side landmarks.

**Thursday, May 19, 12 Noon**

**Brown Bag Lunch: Dr. John Cooper, Elgin Academy History.**

Elgin Academy kicks off the 2011 Brown Bag Lecture Series with John Cooper's history of the school and a tour of the campus.

## Museum Open House March 13

*Rebecca Marco, Editor*

Please join us from 1:00 to 4:00 PM on March 13th for the grand opening of the third and newest phase of our *From River to Rails: Elgin 1870-1910* exhibit! At 1:00 there will be a demonstration hosted by Ellie Carlson of the food preparation methods of 1900. Ellie will also discuss the evolution of food safety laws and changes in food preparation methods over the years.

Light refreshments, as well as samples from the cooking class, will be served. Hope to see you there!

## Another Silent Auction Donor

Our sincere apology to Richard Renner for omitting his name as a donor to the November Silent Auction fund raiser. Thank you very much, Richard.

## Welcome New Members!

- Patricia and William Crowl
- Sean McMullin
- Jennifer Menke
- Jody Stepnowski
- Lauren Stewart

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## In Memoriam: Gregg Ziegler, friend of the Museum

David Siegenthaler



Gregg Ziegler (Courier-News photo cn52043)

Gregg Ziegler passed away at age 89 on June 22, 2010. A former owner of the Ziegler's Ace Hardware chain of stores, Gregg was a longtime member of the Elgin Area Historical Society, as was his brother and co-owner, Jim, and their father, Lyle, who founded the firm in 1930. Gregg was preceded in death by his parents and brother, as well as his first wife, June, who passed away in 1991. He is survived by his wife JoAnn, whom he married in 1992, and his two children, Brian, current president of Ziegler's Ace Hardware, and Mary (Steve) Schmitendorf.

The Ziegler family has been a longtime supporter of the Elgin Area Historical Society and Museum. In the 1980s and early 1990s, when the Society was struggling financially to complete the restoration of the building that would become its museum, the Zieglers donated all of the high quality paint needed for the second and third floors. When Gregg's brother Jim passed away in 2003, many memorial contributions were given to the Society in his name. In 2008, Gregg, an avid watch collector, donated two rare Elgin pocket watches, now on display in the Museum. Gregg also left a \$10,000 bequest for the continuing upkeep of the Museum's watch display room.

Gregg graduated from Elgin High School in 1939 and enrolled at Kalamazoo College, despite his father's offer of a car if he stayed home. World War II interrupted his education, and Gregg enlisted in the Marines as a private in 1942. He completed the Marines' officer training program and worked his way up to captain, an accomplishment he was always very proud of, according to his daughter, given the high

attrition rate of officer candidates. After World War II, he returned to Kalamazoo College and graduated in 1947. Gregg then returned home to join his father Lyle in business and in 1949 he married June Anderson.

Brother Jim joined the family business in 1954 after serving with the Marines in Korea and graduating from Illinois State University. The original store at 9 East Chicago Street was quite small and a larger store was built at 215 North Spring Street in 1958. By 1969 this store had nearly tripled in size and business was booming. A second store was opened in 1973 in West Dundee, and by the year 2000 there were ten Ziegler's Ace Hardware stores in the area. Lyle passed away in 1978 and his sons Gregg and Jim took over. Gregg's son Brian joined the firm in 1973, and Jim's son David joined in 1979. By 1992, Brian and David would buy out their father's interests and become the owners.

Gregg had a lifelong passion for automobile racing and set a speed record at Daytona Beach, Florida, in 1960. His average speed of 144.927 mph in the NASCAR Championship's Flying Mile event still stands as the all-time record. Gregg raced production model cars in NASCAR Speed Week events from 1956 to 1961, winning the Flying Mile in 1960 and 1961. In recognition of his racing accomplishments, Gregg was inducted into the Elgin Sports Hall of Fame in 2001.

Gregg's business and civic involvements were numerous. He was president of the Elgin Businessmen's Association, the Elgin Area Chamber of Commerce, the United Way of Elgin, the Illinois Retail Hardware Association and the Advisory Board of St. Joseph Hospital. He served on the board of directors of the First National Bank of Elgin for many years, and was a founding director of both the Larkin Bank and the First Community Bank. He served as director on the Ace Hardware Corporation's national board of directors, and in 1983 was honored as "Retailer of the Year" by the Illinois Retail Merchants Association. He was also very active in the First United Methodist Church.

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## Recent Donations

Many generous memorial donations were received in honor of deceased Society members Dick Smith, Don Tuttle, Art Miller, Walt Rust, Rosella Menke, and Jan Embree. The memories of these wonderful people live on in our hearts and at the Museum.

## General Donations

- The Searchers
- Terry Gabel and Sue Brigham
- Geraldine Hagemann
- Marilyn Magowan
- Linda Rock
- Patricia Rust

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## In Memoriam: Remembering Photographer Cliff Lohs

David Siegenthaler

Years ago The Courier-News donated nearly a hundred boxes of photographic negatives to the Elgin Area Historical Society Museum. They covered the years 1936-1986 and included most of the local photos printed in the newspaper during those years. The majority of these photos were taken by Cliff Lohs, who worked for The Courier-News from 1937 to 1984, except for his service in World War II. Altogether there are tens of thousands of photographic negatives, an invaluable contribution to Elgin's history during that time.

Clifford Earl Lohs passed away on May 10, 2010, survived by his wife Peggy and three children. He was born in Elgin on June 20, 1919 and graduated from Elgin High School in 1937. Invited to join the high school camera club, he felt obliged to learn something of the craft. After graduation, he was hired by The Courier-News as an errand boy and about a year later began taking photos for the paper.

Cliff was inducted into the Army in January 1943 and served three and a half years. He had hoped to be sent to photo school, but because of his experience he was put directly to work. He spent two years as an Army Air Force technician servicing gun-cameras used to train fighter pilots. It began to look like a permanent job, so he and Peggy were married on the Florida base where he was stationed. But then the Army felt an urgent need for more foot soldiers, so Peggy went home and Cliff got a quick course in advanced infantry training. He was sent to Europe as a basic rifleman and arrived at the front, when good fortune took over. The regimental photographer was injured and Cliff got his job.

Probably the most memorable photos of his life were made on April 29, 1945, the day U.S. troops liberated the death camp at Dachau. In a 1995 Courier-News interview, Cliff looked back fifty years to that day and said there was only one reason he would agree to discuss it at all. "I can't believe there are still people who won't acknowledge these sort of things happen," he said. Not only did he see the atrocities but he documented them in photographs, some of which appear in the history book for his division and others which he mailed home to his wife.

After retiring from The Courier-News in 1984, Cliff did about ten years of free-lance commercial photography, including considerable work for Elgin Commu-

nity College and the City of Elgin. He was an avid sailor at Lake Geneva, and enjoyed spending family time at his vacation home in Door County, Wisconsin. He was a lifelong member of Epworth United Methodist Church.

At his retirement, Cliff wrote, "I don't know how I survived this long in the business, because I'm pretty much a private person and fairly sensitive. I respect the hard luck of other people, and I cannot bring myself to stick a camera in their faces, although I know at times you have to do things that are unpleasant." According to Elgin historian Mike Alft, Cliff "was kind of serious. He saw a lot of terrible things in the second World War. He was always a very nice person, a gentleman."

Longtime Elginites may still recall two of his most memorable newspaper photos. One appeared on the front page of the April 1, 1961 paper. It was a composite photo showing a warship, the "U.S.S. Miraculous," on the Fox River with the Tower Building in the background. It was an April Fool's joke, complete with an interview with the ship's captain, "Hugh G. Lark." Mike Alft says that this was Cliff's favorite photo of all that he produced for the newspaper. That photo was blown up and displayed at Cliff's visitation. The other memorable photo was the toppling of the Elgin National Watch Company's clock tower that appeared on the front page of the October 3, 1966 paper. This final stroke in the demolition of the watch factory represented the end of a hundred-year run as the industry that made Elgin famous worldwide.



*Cliff Lohs' Photo of Old Main in Fog*

## In Memoriam: Longtime Volunteer Jan Embree Passes On

Rebecca Marco, Editor



Longtime EAHS member and volunteer Jan Embree passed away in January. Jan had a long association with the Society and was a volunteer at the Museum for many years. Her teaching background and childlike sense of wonder made her a natural for conducting the educational programs offered by the Museum.

Museum Educator Lucy Elliott pointed out that Jan will always be remembered as the creator of the "Great-Grandma's Kitchen" program offered by the Museum, in which students learn hands-on about "the old ways" of cooking, now unknown or taken for granted thanks to modern grocery stores and kitchen appliances.

Jan was a kindergarten teacher for over 30 years, at Gifford School and Hillcrest School in Elgin. She will be missed by the Society and by her many friends.

## Thoughts on the Old Lords Park Zoo

Chuck Emmert

The zoo was established in 1896 and it had American bison, elk, whitetail deer, bears, and birds in a glass enclosure. An awful snake pit, there for a long time, still haunts my memories. Probably the most interesting exhibit for the public was the bear cage, which usually had two or three bears in it. The bear cage existed until 1969 when the bears were sold off.

When I was using the Courier-News microfilm from 1901 to 1948 to research the history of Elgin Country Club, I noticed articles describing how mischievous young boys picked the lock on the bear cage and released the bears. I saw three different articles and there were probably more. The most recent article told

of a couple of men going for a leisurely walk after dinner, a couple of blocks from the park, and facing a couple of bears ahead of them on the sidewalk.

The zookeepers always managed to get the bears back into the cage, and no one was ever injured, but there must have been some very tense moments!



Bear Pit, Lord's Park

## The Elgin Little Symphony Orchestra

Chuck Emmert

In 1917, a small musical group began rehearsals with Mr. Jesse Ora Ballinger, a violinist and teacher with the Chicago Conservatory of Music who lived in Elgin.

Starting slowly, it grew to over 60 musicians and produced a number of concerts in the area. Printed below is a concert program from May 23, 1927, played in the Elgin High School auditorium.

<b>Elgin's Little Symphony Orchestra</b> JESSE ORA BALLINGER, Conductor		The Chicago Conservatory of Music ELGIN BRANCH PRESENTS ELGIN'S ...Little Symphony Orchestra... JESSE ORA BALLINGER, Conductor	
Violins A. E. Cameron, Concertmaster Marjorie Alice Ballard, Principal Marjorie Ballard Marjorie Jane Robbins H. A. Kretzschmar Anna Kull Stella Lindquist Anna Lindquist Lillian Blacklock Emma Ballinger	Bassoon U. K. Reese French Horn Lynn Salisbury Trombone Mrs. George Fineman Trumpets Gladys Schaller E. J. Lord Richard Liebke	Viola William Whitcomb Cello Mrs. N. J. Taylor Dorothy Ballinger Florence Dwyer Stokes Double Bass Carl Whitcomb Piano Milton Dalby Gerald Baker Helma Meyer	Tuba and Sousaphone Walter Ballard Shelby Emmert Drums and Traps Ed Galloway George Ballard Timpani Herbert Robinson
Organ Mrs. Lynn Salisbury Olga Kellenberger Oboe Dr. V. H. Rea Clarinets Frederick Schmeiser Ralph Emmert Emma Galloway Emma Lindquist John Hennessey Flutes and Piccolo Helma Robinson Elmer Spangler Charles Gruber	Dramatic Director Jessie Given-Montgomery Programs Alice P. Ballard Publicity Manager Lillian Johnson Walling Mechanic William Deach Electrician Elmer Spangler Robert Deaton	<b>ASSISTING ARTISTS:</b> FRANKLIN C. SOREN, Tenor BERNICE ROSENGARDEN CHARMAYNE CLEARY } Dancers, FRUDDEN BALLARD } Pupils of Miss Dorothy Young Members of the FACULTY and their ARTIST PUPILS GERALD STOKES, Accompanist	
<b>H. A. KRETZSCHMAR</b> VIOLIN MAKER AND REPAIRER 21 East Van Buren Street CHICAGO, ILL. <small>(Was First Prize for BEST NEW VIOLIN in International Contest          at the World's Fair, 1912 in Chicago, Illinois.)</small>			

Program from the Little Symphony's Concert

Miss Marjorie Alice Ballard, principal violinist, won the Gold Medal for Violin Solos at the Illinois State University All States Contest for 1927. She had won the Silver Medal in 1925 and 1926.

There are some interesting names in the orchestra. Among them were U.K. Reese, bassoon, who later conducted the Elgin High School band and was there until 1942. Herman Bohnenstengel, timpani, who had a prominent men's store downtown on Grove avenue and was the golf champion in 1935 at Elgin Country Club. Dr. Fred Schurmeier, clarinet, was a very prominent doctor and Dr. Rea, a very well known dentist.

A number of old Elgin names are included and also in the violin section was H.A. Kretzschmar, famous violin maker in downtown Chicago.

The Orchestra held a reunion in 1930-31. The following is a reprint of a newspaper article of the time, describing the reunion.

### Reunion Held, Little Symphony Orchestra

The first of the reunions that are to become annual affairs occurred yesterday by a group of former Elgin Little Symphony Orchestra members and their families who met at Lords Park, the place where the orchestra originated.

Dr. J. Ora Ballinger, for the last 13 years a member of the music faculty at Mooseheart, was one of the "fiddlers" as well as director of the original five who organized in 1917. They added to their numbers during the ensuing years until there was an orchestra of more than 60. The others were Miss Alice Pearsall (Mrs. John Heindel), Miss Norma Stewart (Mrs. Clarence Eggert), Miss Florence Harbaugh and Earl Gebhart.

### Hold Memorial Service

Many Elginites will remember the pageant entitled "The History of the Fox Valley," which was staged in 1917 at Lords Park by Mrs. George S. Montgomery, who solicited the cooperation of these musicians to play for the old-fashioned square dances included in it. For the two years following, the group met for rehearsals at Mrs. Montgomery's home and she served as their business manager.

When their numbers increased so that more space was needed, she secured for them the privilege of meeting at the watch factory gymnasium in the old National House.

Yesterday a short memorial was conducted for five deceased members, Miss Emma Ballinger, William Whitcomb, Charles Gracer, Mrs. George Fiesman and William Beach. An interesting period of reminiscences was also enjoyed, closing with an original poem by

Mrs. Montgomery. At 5 o'clock a covered-dish supper was served in the pavilion dining room, fall flowers from the gardens of P. G. Boesch gracing the candle-lighted tables.

### Name Officers

Mrs. Elsie K. Taylor, who instigated plans for the reunion, was elected president for the coming year; Carl Whitcomb, vice-president, and J. Ora Ballinger, secretary-treasurer. Mrs. Taylor appointed a committee of three to plan next year's reunion, Mrs. Ralph Emmert, Carl Whitcomb, and Miss Olga Kellenberger.

Others who served with Mrs. Taylor on the committee to plan yesterday's get-together, which was attended by a company of 36, are: Mr. and Mrs. Emmert, Mrs. Florence Fredericks Smith, Mr. and Mrs. Walter Ballard, Miss Martha Hoffman, Mrs. Montgomery, Mr. Whitcomb, and Doctor and Mrs. Ballinger.

## Elgin Torquers Racing Club Jacket Discovered in Florida Museum

*Rebecca Marco, editor*

In addition to the well-known Road Races of a century ago, Elginites have enjoyed other motor sports through the years. Board member Richard Renner recently visited the Garlits Auto Museum in Ocala, Florida. On display in the museum was an "Elgin Torquers" jacket. No one at the museum could provide information about the jacket.



*The Garlits Auto Museum Display*

After returning to Elgin, Rich showed the photo above to board member Jerri Barnhart, who said that her husband Ken had been a member of the Elgin Torquers car club as a young man.



*Elgin Torquers Car Club with trophies (Ken Barnhart upper left)*

Rich provided Jerri's information to Don Garlits, who told Rich he thought the jacket had come from an original member of Elgin Torquers club. Rich guesses that the jacket in the museum may have come from former Elginite Larry Teter, who died in 2004 in Holly Springs, Mississippi. At one time Larry owned a speed shop in Elgin.

For more information on the career of Big Daddy Don Garlits and his museum complex, visit [www.garlits.com](http://www.garlits.com).

## Old Political Tactic is New Again

*Editor's Note: Ward Hill Lamon was a friend of Abraham Lincoln. In 1840/1841, when the state bank was threatened in the Illinois legislature, the Whigs came to its defense by absenting themselves to prevent a quorum, like today's Wisconsin legislators fleeing to Illinois to avoid addressing Wisconsin's fiscal problems. Below is an excerpt from Lamon's 1872 book, The Life of Abraham Lincoln, describing the incident.*

This session (the session of 1840-1) had been called two weeks earlier than usual, to provide for the January interest on the debt. But the banks had important business of their own in view, and proceeded to improve the occasion. In 1837, and every year since then, the banks had succeeded in getting acts of the Legislature which condoned their suspension of specie payments. But, by the terms of the last act, their charters were forfeited unless they resumed before the adjournment of the next session. The Democrats, however, maintained that the present special session was a

session in the sense of the law, and that, before its adjournment, the banks must hand out "the hard," or die. On the other hand, the Whigs held this session, and the regular session which began on the first Monday in December, to be one and the same, and proposed to give the banks another winter's lease upon life and rags. But the banks were a power in the land, and knew how to make themselves felt. They were the depositories of the State revenues. The auditor's warrants were drawn upon them, and the members of the Legislature paid in their money. The warrants were at a discount of fifty per cent; and, if the banks refused to cash them, the members would be compelled to go home more impecunious than they came. The banks, moreover, knew how to make "opportune loans to Democrats;" and, with all these aids, they organized a brilliant and eventually a successful campaign. In the eyes of the Whigs they were "the institutions of the country," and the Democrats were guilty of incivism in attacking them. But the Democrats retorted with a string of overwhelming slang about rag barons, rags, printed lies, bank vassals, ragocracy, and the "British-bought, bank, blue-light, Federal, Whig party." It was a fierce and bitter contest; and, witnessing it, one might have supposed that the very existence of the State, with the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, depended upon the result. The Democrats were bent upon carrying an adjournment sine die; which, according to their theory, killed the banks. To defeat this, the Whigs resorted to every expedient of parliamentary tactics, and at length hit upon one entirely unknown to any of the standard manuals: they tried to absent themselves in sufficient numbers to leave no quorum behind. "If the Whigs absented themselves," says Mr. Gillespie, a Whig member, "there would not be a quorum left, even with the two who should be deputed to call the ayes and noes. The Whigs immediately held a meeting, and resolved that they would all stay out, except Lincoln and me, who were to call the ayes and noes. We appeared in the afternoon: motion to adjourn sine die was made, and we called the ayes and noes. The Democrats discovered the game, and the sergeant-at-arms was sent out to gather up the absentees. There was great excitement in the House, which was then held in a church at Springfield. We soon discovered that several Whigs had been caught and brought in, and that the plan had been spoiled; and we—Lincoln and I—determined to leave the hall, and, going to the door, found it locked, and then raised a window and jumped out, but not until the Democrats had succeeded in adjourning. Mr. Gridley of McLean accompanied us in our exit.... I think Mr. Lincoln always regretted that he entered into that arrangement, as he deprecated every thing that savored of the revolutionary."

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## Collections Corner

*Elizabeth Marston, Museum Director*

This mirror was donated to the collection by Judith Bielenberg Dowling. It was used by Mrs. Carl Parlasca as she dressed for the part of Old Nokomis in Elgin's Hiawatha Pageant. Mrs. Parlasca and Minnehaha would prepare for the show in a teepee to the far left of the stage.

Mrs. Parlasca gave the mirror to Mrs. Alice (Robert) Bielenberg Jr., who assembled a floral display to honor "Mrs. Par" for her contributions to the Elgin community.

Mrs. Parlasca passed away in the 1950s. Since that time, the mirror has been in the care of the Bielenberg family. When Alice passed away she asked that the mirror be donated the Elgin Historical Society.

The mirror will be going on exhibit in the Hiawatha Room.



2011.7.1