

Grundy County Historical Society Newsletter



Volume 5 Issue 4 October 2017

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Facebook: Museum of the Grundy County
Historical Society-Illinois

Web site: *currently under construction*

Museum Hours: Thursday, Friday, Saturday
10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Group Tours by Appointment—Call for Appointment

The Grundy County Historical Society Newsletter is published four times a year. It is distributed to members of record free of charge via e-mail and USPS. Subscriptions start at \$10 for students annually.

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MUSEUM NEWS

NEW ADDITIONS

Our latest donations include a player piano in bird's eye maple, a wood that today comes under the label costly, precious, and rare. It came to the Museum on July 19 and is in place. Now, we have to learn how to put the rolls into the player piano because it is not something that is common knowledge today.

We also received TWO rocking chairs. They are unusual in that we believe they were used on picnics or for placement in the back of a wagon.

So, come to the Museum and see our new acquisitions!

FESTIVAL OF TREES

text here

GRUNDY COUNTY TRIVIA

The Hopkins House replaced what building that burned down? Find the answer elsewhere in this newsletter.

NEW MEMBERS

The following people have joined the Historical Society. We welcome their support.

Ron Hodgen, Morris, IL

Sarah Ferguson Potter, Naperville, IL

FACEBOOK



Hello to all 809 of our Facebook friends. We appreciate your interest in our Museum and your support. If you're not a member, please consider joining our Facebook page as well as the Museum.

We really like your photos and discussions which are fascinating to us and to the rest of the people using the site. Dorothy Cunnea is our very dedicated volunteer handling Facebook and we hope you continue to "discuss" on our site. And the site is helpful to the Museum. Recently, Dorothy posted a picture of

unknown people from our archives and our Facebook friends were able to identify everyone in the picture! Our thanks and know that we appreciate your help!

If you wish to access the Museum's facebook page, request a friendship from Museum of the Grundy County Historical Society-Illinois.

RADIO



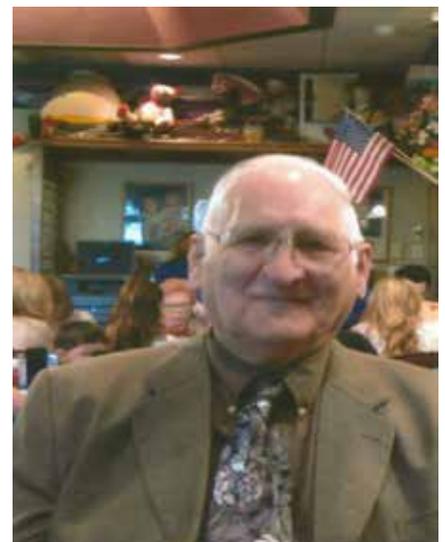
Find the Museum on the radio the first Monday of every month. Tune in to "People Are Talking," WCSJ, 103.1 on your FM dial, from approximately 9:15 a.m. to 9:30 a.m.

REMEMBERING KEN

As we all know too well, Ken Sereno passed away on July 15 of this year. It was unexpected, but we are comforted in the knowledge that at the end his suffering was mercifully brief. His presence in the Museum is sorely missed. His knowledge of our Grundy history is sorely missed. No one is in the wings to step up to fill his shoes. And his generosity to the Museum and the Historical Society is unequalled.

Your editor, a newcomer to Grundy County, hardly knew Ken, but would see him in the Museum, taking the time to walk around with visitors and explain our exhibits, regaling them with stories to go with what they were seeing.

Your editor was told by Dorothy Cunnea that Ken, upon his





retirement, spent several years going through the entire *Morris Herald* archives, becoming steeped in the history of both Morris and Grundy County. His capacity to then present that history in a lively and interesting fashion to our visitors was second to none. He was dedicated to history. As members of the Grundy County Historical

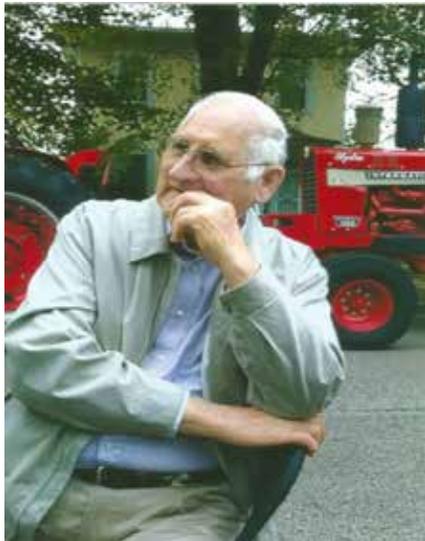
Society and Museum, you know that our history matters—to us, to our children, to our children’s children. Our present couldn’t exist without our past and our knowledge of our past helps us understand our present and our future as well. Ken fully recognized this and made it his life’s work to share his knowledge of the past with all of us.

Your editor, also a Joan and also a widow, extends her most heartfelt sympathies to Joanie, Ken’s wife of 65 years.

Your editor wishes she could have had the opportunity to know Mr. Ken Sereno better. —Joan Bledig

* * *

My favorite memory of working with Ken Sereno takes place in the basement of the Lott Block, now known as Kindlespire Auto. It’s August 1997, and we’ve got to get our slide show taped. Pam Wilson, director of the Morris Area Public Library, the idea



person and the great encourager, had tasked us with creating a video based on Ken’s research on the history of the buildings of downtown Morris—Ken’s retirement project.

So, using the material Ken had gathered off the *Morris Herald* microfilms, donated to the Library by the Alida C. Bliss Chapter of the D.A.R. as their American

Bicentennial Project, and relying on a copy of the 1888 Holiday Supplement loaned by Dorothy Randall, I wrote the script.

Ken would walk around Morris and gather photos of anything he was looking for, just by talking to people. So by using photos

from people in the community and from county histories, we put together a carousel of slides to go with the script.

I had no idea how printed word and photographic slides could end up as a sound video that people would want to buy, but Scott Kindlespire did. He told us to meet him at the auto shop on a Sunday afternoon. He led us down an old flight of stairs into the basement. This was a sound studio?!

Ken was the narrator. I was just there to watch. Scott seated Ken on a bar stool that squeaked every time he moved the wrong way, and turned on his equipment. I looked around at the walls hung with auto parts and marveled at being underground on Washington Street.

I had advised Ken to read the script aloud five times before the taping. Instead he and Joanie went out with friends the night before.

Now I realize it’s hard to read somebody else’s writing, but Ken did all right. Until he got to the part about the opening of the Times Theater on Liberty Street, when “600 people stood in line



to see *The Great Pond* starring Maurice Chevalier and Claudette Colbert.” Ken stumbled on “Maurice Chevalier.” He stated with “More ice, Cavler.”

“Come on Ken, it’s ‘mor-ECE’ chev-AL-yere.” Say it five times: Maurice Chevalier, Maurice Chevalier. . . .”

“O.K.” says Ken “Morris Chevrolet. . . .” and he kept trying until we were all laughing hysterically. Scott had to turn off his equipment and I cut Maurice Chevalier out of the script. After a couple of hours Scott had what he needed and we all went home.

He called a couple of days later to report that the video *The History of Downtown Morris* was ready. Ken, Pam, and I met downstairs in the Library meeting room to view it.

I was amazed by S & S Productions. It was totally professional.

Afterwards Pam stated, “I commend you both!” I looked at Ken and sighed, “We passed!”

Ken Sereno loved the discovery of local history. He shared every story he found with the guy downtown, with his neighbor, and his glee was contagious. Best of all, he got those stories printed so they'd be preserved, and anyone could have a copy. Ken Sereno was our local history rock star. —Debbie Steffes

* * *

Ken Sereno

My fondest memory of Ken is his smile! He would get this little smile on his face whenever he found new artifacts, books, or newspaper articles. I would always would say to him, what did you find now Ken? He was so proud of what he had found. He was always adding items of interest to our Museum. Ken helped build the museum and he loved collecting history of Morris and Grundy County.

Ken would always be showing me his latest book of history he wrote or talk about history tours he be will doing for the community. He was so proud to help educate people on the history of Grundy County.

I know he is still looking down sending smiles from up above, knowing we will continue his dream of expanding the museum and expanding the education of history in Grundy County.

You will be missed dear friend, and your smile ☺.

—Sandi Dransfeldt

* * *

Ken Sereno Memories

I knew Ken before, but really got to know him during the eight months we spent together building the present day museum. Ken was there every day and was always happy to do whatever was asked. There is a newspaper article hanging on the wall by the entrance to the museum conference room with a picture of Ken installing the ceiling tiles.

That was Ken, always doing whatever he could to make the museum better. His latest cause was to make it bigger. The last conversation I had with him was when I was visiting him at the hospital, the day before he passed away. He was asking me what type of flooring should be in the new addition. To the very end he was thinking of the museum; it was his passion.

I truly wish he could have lived long enough to see it completed. He has now passed this passion onto the rest of us and the community, to make his dream come true.

Ken will be truly missed.

—Dan Dransfeldt

* * *

Ken Sereno—his death on July 15 has left us shattered. His knowledge of the area, his books, and his devotion to history is unrivaled. How did he get this knowledge—after retiring he spent four years at the Library reading all the *Morris Herald* newspapers. This knowledge was added to that which he had acquired as a businessman and alderman here in Morris. He is sorely missed and will continue to be missed.

Rest in peace—a gentleman of the old school. Our sympathy remains with Joan, his wife of 65 years. Donna Sroczyński



* * *

Memories of Ken Sereno

After Ken's passing my mind has been filled with numerous memories about him. It is really difficult to pick out just a few. I decided to select some of the everyday memories to share.

To begin with, Ken would walk to the Museum from his house as much as he could. There were days he came through the door breathing pretty hard. I would always ask if he was all right. He would give me the "look." The look became pretty common between us. It was sort of like the current idiom of our younger generation, "Really!?!?!"

He would spy the candy dish and pounce down on the chair across the desk from me. He loved that rocking desk chair. We would talk about what was going on with the Museum. He would wait until I looked at him and lean as far back on the chair as he could without falling. I would tell him not to do that because he would fall, and he smiled like a kid and would do it again. I kept telling him I was afraid he would get hurt. Later, he would get up and study the candy dish and pick up a few pieces and we would talk again.

We would talk about so many things, our love for history, new historical facts we had learned, what projects we were working on. He would bring in a gadget and teach me what it was, what it did; what was going on in our lives; health issues; and almost any topic related to our lives, the Museum, and history. There was one day we didn't talk very much—when he found out the news about his son. Our



words failed at that time. We sat and looked at each other and then at the desk.

No one will ever replace his knowledge, sense of humor and his ability to teach. You are missed my friend, teacher, and mentor.
—Dorothy Cunnea

* * *

A Remembrance of Ken Sereno

I have know Ken for many years and through various sources. But what stands out for me is his love of history - especially local history. He would go to many lengths in searching out something related to local history. I remember talking to him one day and he showed me an old-time, little child's shoe that he found in a dumpster in front of a home of an elderly lady that had passed away. It was one of those high button shoes. But every time I think of Ken dumpster diving for that shoe, it makes me smile. He was a devoted historian! —Theresa Lamb

CHRISTMAS TREE LIGHTS

by Donna Sroczynski



For centuries, revelers relied on wax candles to illuminate their Christmas trees. But when Edward Hibberd Johnson introduced electric Christmas tree lights in 1882, he not only added flash and color to a Yuletide tradition, he saved lives in the process.

As Christmas approached in the waning days of 1882, Edward Hibberd Johnson joined his fellow New Yorkers in decking the halls. Then as now, Yuletide traditions ran deep, and the 36-year-old once

again undertook the annual ritual of decorating the parlor of his Manhattan home with a majestic evergreen. For this particular Christmas season, however, Johnson decided to freshen the cherished holiday tradition with a state-of-the-art innovation—electric lights.

Nearly three years had passed since Thomas Edison demonstrated the first practical light bulb, and few people were better acquainted with the emerging electrical technology than Johnson, the Wizard of Menlo Park's trusted business associate. As a manager of the Automatic Telegraph Company in 1871, Johnson had shrewdly hired the 24-year-old Edison, but the whiz kid proved so brilliant and entrepreneurial that in short order their roles reversed and the boss became employee for the famed inventor. Johnson worked as a vice president of the Edison Electric Light Company, and he was chief engineer for the electric generation system that Edison had unveiled in lower Manhattan that September.

Now at Christmastime, Johnson prepared to make some history of his own. For centuries—according to some folklore all the way back to the 1500s when Protestant reformer Martin Luther wished to replicate the wintertime sight of stars twinkling among the evergreens—people had used wax candles to

illuminate their Christmas trees. The candles may have been beautiful, but they were obviously a huge fire hazard. Every year as the holiday approached, without fail newspapers printed tragic stories about Christmas trees accidentally catching fire and houses burning to the ground, sometimes with deadly consequences.

By replacing candles with electrical lights, Johnson not only greatly reduced the risk of Christmas trees going up in flames, he added flash and color as well. According to a reporter from the Detroit Post and Tribune who visited the home of Edison's right-hand man, 80 brilliant red, white and blue hand-wired bulbs "about as large as an English walnut" lit up Johnson's Christmas tree. An additional 28 lights sparkled on two wires mounted on the ceiling.



Edward Hibberd Johnson

Johnson's electrically lit tree was revolutionary—literally. It spun in a circle six times a minute on a little pine box as its lights flashed in "a continuous twinkling of dancing colors." An electric current drawn from Edison's main office powered the lights and the crank that rotated the tree. "I need not tell you that the scintillating evergreen was a pretty sight," gushed the newspaper reporter. "One can hardly imagine anything prettier."

Unbeknownst to Johnson, he also launched the annual Yuletide tradition of trying to one-up the neighbors with dazzling Christmas light displays. Once electrical power spread to Manhattan's Gilded Age mansions, the city's prominent socialites coveted the novel lights to showcase their Christmas trees at their ornate holiday parties. Those first bulbs, however, lacked screw-in sockets and required the tedious process of wiring each lamp individually, a task that few had the knowledge or time to undertake. As a result, members of high society spent as much as \$300 per tree to hire electricians to install lights on their conifers and be on call in case a bulb burned out or broke.

The Wizard's Light Show

Edison had his incandescent light bulbs pretty well figured out, and was on the lookout for a way to advertise them. Brian Murray's article "Christmas Lights and Community Building in America" [PDF] describes Edison's marketing trick during that holiday season. To display his invention as a means of heightening Yuletide excitement, he strung up incandescent bulbs all around his Menlo Park laboratory compound [PDF], so that passing commuters on the nearby railway could see the Christmas miracle. But Edison being Edison, he decided to make the challenge a little trickier by powering the lights from a remote generator *eight miles away*.





1904 GE ad

At the same time, Thomas Edison was known for his wacky publicity stunts, but during the Christmas of 1880 he went for the sentimental rather than shock value. That year, instead of electrocuting an elephant, he brought us the first electric Christmas light display.

The White House Christmas tree became electrified in 1894 when President Grover Cleveland's daughters were delighted by the evergreen that the *Wheeling Register* described as "very beautifully trimmed and decorated with tiny parti-colored electric lamps in place of the old time wax candles." For most of the country, however, candles still remained the primary means of illuminating trees because of the limited availability of electric power and the cost and hassle of the Christmas lights themselves. That began to change at the turn of the 20th century when the General Electric Company started to produce and sell electric Christmas lights that did not require the services of an electrician to wire. The company accentuated the safety advantages of electric lights in their advertisements in popular magazines of the day such as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Harper's Bazaar*. "No danger from the lights on Christmas trees when Edison Miniature Lamps are used," boasted the copy of one ad next to a dramatic drawing of a candle-lit tree engulfed in an inferno.

In 1903, General Electric began to offer Christmas lights in eight-lamp strings, called festoons, that featured pre-wired porcelain sockets, miniature glass bulbs and a screw-in plug that attached to a wall or ceiling light socket. The \$12 price for a three-festoon set was beyond the reach of most consumers, but department stores in some cities made the lights available for rental for \$1.50.

By the 1940s when electrification had become standard in rural America, electric lights had replaced wax candles on most Christmas trees, and the danger of trees bursting into flames had been replaced by the annual frustration of untangling gnarled webs of Christmas light strands. For that, thank Johnson, the man who has been called the "Father of Electric Christmas Tree Lights."

The tradition of stringing electric lights may have started as a Christmas thing in America, but now it's a global phenomenon used for all kinds winter festivals. It's a practice we take for granted—come December, they're everywhere. The evolution of the Christmas light parallels that of the light bulb, with some remarkably ornate—OK, tacky—variations. But regardless of

how they look, one thing's for certain: They're a *much* better option than sticking a candle in a tree.

In the Beginning, There was Fire

Today we look at Christmas lights and think "Oh, those are pretty." But the tradition of lighting lights in the winter months didn't start off with aesthetics in mind. December is the darkest month of the year with the shortest days. People living without central heating in the 12th century were understandably unhappy when the sun went down and plunged them into the cold depths of night. It is reported that the winter of 1184 was the first recorded lighting of the Yule Log [PDF] in Germany. The burning log was seen as a symbol of the sun's promise to return. It probably didn't hurt that a big burning hunk of wood makes for a pretty good heat source.

The Christmas tree has a whole story behind it that we won't get into here, but (Fun Fact: they were originally hung upside down from the ceiling—hilarious!) , Unfortunately, the only way to add Christmas lights to a tree back then was with candles. Obviously, this was a pretty bad idea. So bad that, unlike today, the tree would only be put up a few days before Christmas



[PDF] and was promptly taken down afterwards. The candles would remain lit only for a few minutes per night, and even then families would sit around the tree and watch it vigilantly,



buckets of sand and water nearby. It's kind of like the old-timey equivalent of deep-frying a turkey: People knew it could burn their house down, but proceeded to do it anyway.

By 1908, insurance companies wouldn't even pay for damages caused by Christmas tree fires. Their exhaustive research demonstrated that burning wax candles that were loosely secured to a dried-out tree *inside your house* wasn't safe. At all. Electric Christmas lights were becoming a viable option for some Americans. They weren't perfect—incandescent bulbs can get

plenty hot, and sparks from malfunctioning strings can still light up a dry tree—but it was a much safer option than lighting multiple fires so close to their favorite fuel.

Keep in mind that by “some Americans,” I mean the extremely rich. In 1900, a single string of electric lights cost \$12 —around \$300 in today’s money. It would take the magic of mass manufacturing to create the Clark Griswold-esque neighborhood light displays would become an American tradition.

The Dawn of Tacky Lights

In 1900, eight years after General Electric purchased the patent rights to Edison’s bulbs, the first known advertisement for Christmas tree lights appeared in *Scientific American Magazine*. Like I said, these suckers weren’t cheap. They were so expensive that the ad suggests *renting* lights for a holiday display.

Twenty-five years later, demand was up. There were 15 companies in the biz of selling Christmas lights, and in 1925 they formed a consortium called the NOMA Electric Corporation, the largest Christmas light manufacturer in the world.

Even though NOMA was formed three years prior to the Great Depression, their appeal was great enough to pull through, becoming a juggernaut that was synonymous with Christmas lights from the Depression clear through to the Civil Rights Movement. NOMA didn’t just further Edison’s vision, though. They worked hard to bedazzle, becoming the world’s biggest manufacturer of the bubble light—arguably the first great mass-produced Christmas decoration.

Though NOMA is no more, these psychedelic bubble lights are thankfully still in existence. The colorful round plastic cases hold an unseen bulb, while a candle-shaped vial of clear liquid protrudes upward. As the bulb heats up, the liquid—usually methylene chloride, a chemical with a low boiling point—also heats up, so that the vial would bubble, flickering like the candle it was supposed to replace.

Alas, in 1968 the NOMA Electric Company stopped manufacturing lights, and the bubble lights became more of a novelty, soon to be joined by a host of odd shaped Christmas lights, including chili peppers, flamingos, and the ridiculous beer can.



With NOMA, the tacky Pandora’s box had opened, and even people who didn’t spring for bubble lights or their Tex-Mex successors have done wonders with the decidedly more standardized sets we all know today. Once they were weather-proofed for outdoor use, it was only a matter of time before they were stapled to every square inch of house, hearth, tree, even truck.

The Lights You Know and Love

Incandescent lights are the ones that started it all. Even though they’re well over a hundred years old now, the technology largely remains the same. The shapes and sizes of the bulbs, on the other hand, have been in constant flux. Now we’re left with three

major types of incandescent Christmas light bulbs, as described by the excellent guide at JimOnLight.com.



The Mini/Fairy Light: This is the big kahuna. If you haven’t seen one of these by now, then you’ve probably never seen Christmas lights. Traditionally, the set is wired in series, hence the age old problem where if one bulb goes out, the rest won’t light. But it’s not hard to find sets that are wired in parallel nowadays. In

my lifetime, these have been fairy lights, Italian lights, and now miniature lights.

These guys also have a lo-fi twinkle method built in. That little red-tipped bulb that comes with each set is made in a way that as the filament heats up, it rises and breaks the circuit. That, of course, shuts off the rest of the lights. When it cools down, it falls again to complete the circuit, and the lights (wait for it . . .) come back on. Physics 101.



C7: Again, an incandescent light that comes in a different-sized glass housing. These are about the size of your thumb, and work in almost exactly the same way as a mini light.

C9: You get the picture by now. Same shape as the C7, but slightly bigger.



LED lights have been growing in popularity for the past few years. Regardless of what you think of their light output, there’s no denying that they’re much more energy efficient than incandescent bulbs, and give off less heat. And who knows, maybe someday they’ll match

the color temperature of good-ol’ tungsten lighting. Until then, here’s what you’ll be looking at.