

# Ames Historical Society

AMES • IOWA

FOUNDED 1980 AS AMES HERITAGE ASSOCIATION

**Newsletter to Members**  
2006 SUMMER.. ISSUE #3/4

*The mission of the Ames Historical Society is to preserve local history and illuminate its stories.*



The Princess Theater was located at 117 Main, and later became The Capitol Theater.

**Ames Historical Society Board:**

**President** Kathy Svec  
**Vice-President**  
**Secretary** Amy Swenson  
**Treasurer** Ken Cameron

**Board Members:**

Roger Coulson, Dennis Wendell, Margaret Elbert Benson, Carole Jensen, Amy Swenson, Dottie Tschopp McGee, Cynthia Bennet, Peggy Baer.

*The Board meets the 2nd Monday of each month at City Hall at 7:15pm. Members welcome!*

**Administrator** Alan Spohnheimer  
**Staff** Alice Mellen, Dennis Wendell, Colleen Hamilton

Ames Historical Society is an incorporated, 501c3 not-for-profit organization dedicated to promoting interest in state and local history through publications, programs, exhibitions and operation of an archive and historic site.

**Headqtrs:** 108 5<sup>th</sup>, Ames, Iowa 50010  
Open Wed-Fri, 1-5pm  
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**Website:** www.ameshistoricalsociety.org

The newsletter is published four times a year for AHS members. Direct comments & questions to: Editor, PO Box 821, Ames, IA 50010 or e-mail above.

Hoggatt School is located on the grounds of Meeker School, near 18<sup>th</sup> and Burnett, Ames, IA. Open April 1 through October 31.

## Sit in a desk! Write on a slate! Read a lesson from the 1860s – all at Hoggatt School!



Come right in! The school house awaits – no homework! No tests!



Try a desk on for size – check out the inkwell, write on a slate.



Schoolmarm Extraordinaire, Carole Jensen, invites you to visit Hoggatt School this summer. Open Saturdays and Sundays through August 27, from 2-4:30pm. Located at 18<sup>th</sup> and Burnett on the grounds of Meeker School. Hands-on fun for kids from 8 to 80!

# Ames Stories – Unique Tales in Local History

## Joe Gerbracht and the Ames Theatre Company

By Kathy Svec, Ames



Joe V. Gerbracht launched a 50-year career in the movie theater business in Ames in 1912. When he retired in 1962, he owned four theaters in Ames – The Collegian on Main Street, The Varsity and New Ames in Campustown and the Ranch Drive-In on west Lincoln Way.

Joe was an Ames High School senior when his father suggested to him, his two sisters, Helen and Della, and his brother, Wilford, that they go into business. With their father's \$5,000 loan, Joe, Helen and Della bought and refurbished the old Scenic Theater at 121 Main Street – the place where they had enjoyed many weekly films.

They remodeled inside and out, installed ventilation and a state-of-the-art movie screen and re-named the theater "Twin Star". Joe was general manager, handling bookings and advertising. Helen ran the box office and Della played the piano to accompany films. Wilford was 13 when the theater opened and handled odd jobs.

Joe was a great promoter! During the early years, they held contests for fiddlers, Charleston dancers and amateur performers. There were style shows and hair fashion shows, special events for college students and children, and humorous promotional stunts. Later, there were food and clothing drives for World War II refugees.



Twin Star & Capitol Theater, east Main Street.

In 1920 and bought the rival Princess Theater on east Main Street, renaming it The Capitol.

Joe took a 2-year leave from the business to serve in the Marine Corps during World War I. When he returned to Ames, he and Helen bought out Della's business interest

The theaters were not without controversy. In 1919, a Board of Censors was installed by local city ordinance to serve as a film reviewing body. This was before the development of industry ratings.

Also in 1919, talk began about opening a theater in campustown. This was strongly opposed by college administrators, who deemed movies a distraction for students. An ordinance that limited construction of theaters to downtown Ames was passed in July, but repealed in August. After the repeal, A.L. Champlin built the American Theater south of campus on Lincoln Way. It opened in Dec. 1919 with the showing of Cecil B. DeMille's *Male and Female*. In 1920, Gerbracht bought the American, re-naming it the Ames Theater.

In 1922, Joe bought Helen's business share and became the sole owner of the Ames Theater Company. In 1927, A.H. Blank and Harry Weinberg of the Tri-State Theaters in Des Moines became Gerbracht's partners. This happy affiliation improved the ease of getting pictures.



Ames Theater on Lincoln Way in Campustown. Brown collection photo

New Ames Theater 1954, Tribune photo

In 1928, the Ames Theater underwent a major rebuilding to modernize and increase its capacity. When it re-opened, Joe called it the "New Ames". By the end of 1928, talking movies had arrived and the New Ames was showing both "Movietone" and "Vitaphone" films.

Another controversy soon raged over Sunday movies. They were prohibited until a city ordinance permitted them downtown in 1928. The issue of Sunday films near campus boiled for nearly 5 years before it was resolved in 1933. Petitions, letters to the editor, editorials, numerous news stories and an election preceded an amendment to the law that permitted showing films 7 days a week in all parts of Ames. In 1938, Joe built a second campustown theater, the Varsity. Despite the

controversies, Joe always felt that he had good cooperation from university personnel.

Joe saw many innovations in the theater business – most notably, the introduction of sound in 1927. Early on, only part of a picture would have audio effects. The sound was recorded on records that were manually synchronized with the film. Joe also saw the transition from eight to twelve minute “flickers” on short subjects to multi-reel, full length stories with plots. Technicolor, cinemascope, magnetic sound, stereophonic sound and 3D – as well as the movie rating system - all developed during his tenure at Ames theaters.



1937 view of the crown jewel of Main Street, the Collegian Theatre

Gerbrach built the 900-seat Art Deco-style Collegian Theatre in 1937 on Main Street. It offered the best sound and largest screen in Ames. The theater could accommodate stage plays as well as film showings.

Joe built the Varsity in campustown in 1938 and the Ranch Drive-In on west Lincoln Way in 1949. The Collegian eventually replaced the Twin Star in the 1930s, and the Capitol, which closed in the early 1950s. On Main Street, Pyle Photo at 121 Main occupies the former Twin Star building. The Collegian closed in January 1974 and was eventually sold to the bank next door. It is still used as bank office space, but remnants of the theater may still be seen inside the building.

Joe Gerbrach loved movies. He claimed to have seen 95% of the pictures booked at his theaters. He made



two or three trips a year to Hollywood where he met and often visited with the great stars and producers. At the left, he is pictured with Dale Evans and Roy Rogers. Gary Cooper and Will Rogers were two of his all-time favorite stars. Rogers paid him to paint “AMES” on the roof of his theater to aid airplane pilots!

*Success in a business is not luck, Joe maintained, it's deciding what you*

*want to do and staying with it. It's working hard and it's using your imagination.*

Joe could sometimes be as much an attraction as his films. He would dress in a tuxedo and greet customers in the lobby. He knew everyone, and people enjoyed his antics. Joe was also known as “the old grandmother” for his insistence on neatness in his buildings and promptness from his employees.

Influenced by the whimsical nature of the entertainment business, Joe changed his name three times. He was christened Joseph Benjamin Gerbracht. Later he chose to use J. Benjamin Gerbracht. This was modified to just plain Joe Gerbracht. In the early 1940s, on a Hollywood trip, he consulted a numerologist. She told him that the best name was Joe V. Gerbrach, advising him to drop the “t”. She promised he would make more money with less work, so he went to Nevada and officially changed his name.



Ca 1939 ad for films at the Varsity, Collegian and Capitol



1957 – lining up for tickets at the Collegian. Tribune photo

In addition to building theaters, Joe was a licensed pilot. He and his brother, Wilford, formed the Gerbracht Aeronautic Corporation and built Ames’ first airport in 1924. Joe was very active in numerous community organizations and he loved outdoorsy sports. He died in 1964.

Gerbrach is shown doing a drawing for prizes in 1956 at the Collegian. Prizes were 25 free lube jobs, a 21-inch TV & a portable sewing machine. Mayor Joseph Lawlor is seen, left, handing the winning ticket to Ray Truesdell, manager of the Ranch Theatre. Mildred Gerbrach was the official clerk.



**What do you remember about Joe Gerbracht and his theaters? Write and tell us!**

## Footnote: Ames Theater Today



Kingland Systems of Clear Lake, Iowa, has remodeled the Ames Theater building in Campustown to accommodate their business operations. Kingland sought to replicate the original front of the building as much as possible, and The Society was pleased to provide them with a vintage photograph to assist in the process. Prior to the renovation, the original façade was covered with decorative aluminum sheeting. Kingland removed that and other recently installed materials and restored the building's front with compatible red brick. Their business sign retains the theater marquee-look. The interior design also kept many key theater-like features.

## We Get Letters and Stories!

John van der Linden of Clear Lake, Iowa, wrote in response to Don McNeil's stories in 2005 newsletters: "I enjoyed reading Don McNeil's recollections of the 1940's in Ames. Inflation was at work then too. Before the Collegian Theater was built, Joe Gerbracht had two theaters down at the other end of Main Street, the Twin Star and The Capitol. We boys went each Saturday to the Twin Star for the latest cowboy show and the admission in those days was only 10 cents. There was no sound other than piano music from the front of the theater. We kids called the Twin Star "the shooting gallery". The one thing that kept us coming to the show every week was a serial always ended at the most exciting spot, so we had to come the next week to see what happened.

"We kids would often stop at Billy Rhodes popcorn stand at the corner of Kellogg and Main. Billy was blind; his wife assisted. In those days, there was still a streetcar running down the center of Main Street and out to campustown. In the Depression days of the late 1920's and early 30's, prices fell apart. At one time corn was selling for 7 cents a bushel and for a while there was a hamburger stand where we could get hamburgers for 5 cents."

## Society News



### July 4<sup>th</sup> Parade

The Society had two representatives in the July 4 Parade on Main Street. AHS president, Kathy Svec (left) was the "Queen of Main

Street" and Ames Mayor Ann Campbell rode under the AHS banner (right). Both vintage cars were loaned by member Roger Volker of Ames. The parade is in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year and was well attended.



## ArtWalk: A Fun Evening



AHS was open on June 2 for ArtWalk, along with many other businesses in the Main Street Cultural District. An exhibit of art from the AHS collection was on display and an additional musical

attraction was a concert by David and Donna Wilder of Ames on their street organette (above).

## Two Board Members Honored

AHS Board members, Amy Swenson and Kathy Svec, were honored this year. Amy was recognized as an "Unsung Hero" by The Tribune for her many volunteer contributions in the community in addition to AHS, such as Beloit Lutheran Services and United Way. Kathy Svec, left, was recognized by the Main Street Cultural District as "Queen of Main Street" for her efforts in establishing the District and guiding its growth. She was also honored by the local chapter of Beta Sigma Pi sorority as their "Woman of the Year" for her community contributions. AHS is very proud to have Amy's and Kathy's skills and talents.



# Ames Historical Society News

## Questers & Bicentennial Quilt

On June 13, the seven Ames Questers groups were hosted at a summer tea at the Ames Public Library by the Neta Snook Chapter. The Historical Society presented the program that featured a number of items from its collection, including the Ames Bicentennial quilt.



presented the program that featured a number of items from its collection, including the Ames Bicentennial quilt. Audrey Marley, left, president of

Neta Snook Chapter, thought the quilt had been lost and was very happy to learn that it was in good hands. The quilt was made by the chapter in 1976. Lenny Mangold, right, stitched one of the blocks.

## Community Fair at NGM

AHS challenged passersby to identify Ames artifacts at the North Grand Mall's Community Fair on April 29. Folks were dared to try to lift a Collegian Theater curtain weight, shown bending the wheels of a two-wheeled cart!



Participants especially enjoyed looking at some of the old Ames photographs that have started emerging from Tribune Photo Archive negatives. AHS enjoyed the opportunity to be at North Grand.

## AHS Receives Three Grants

The Historical Society is the very grateful recipient of grants from the Union Pacific Foundation (\$5,000), the City of Ames (\$8,000) and the Ames Monday Noon Rotary (\$200). The UP and City grants will support activities associated with curating, maintaining and providing access to historic collections. The Rotary grant will help to buy the portable projection equipment needed to present programs to the public in a variety of locations.



## Janet Jepeway

The Society will miss the positive and insightful support provided by Board member and Vice President, Janet Jepeway, Ames. Janet passed away on June 20. She was instrumental in the establishment of AHS's museum building fund and personally undertook the photo

documentation of the transformation of Hallett's Quarry to Hayden Heritage Park. Her quiet but steady influence and pleasure in the Society's accomplishments will be missed. For more about Janet's life and pictures, see our website.

## Seed Savers & Beta Sigma Pi: More Thanks

Thanks also go to Beta Sigma Pi sorority and Seed Savers of Decorah. Beta Sigma Pi Ames chapters contributed \$200 to AHS in conjunction with honoring AHS president, Kathy Svec, as their "Woman of the Year". The donation will help to buy portable LCD projection equipment. Seed Savers donated the heritage variety seeds that the Society sold as a fundraiser this spring. Sales brought in close to \$100. Varieties of seeds are still available, which are good for fall planting and can be kept until next year. Call 232-2148 for information or stop by 108 Fifth.

## Publications For Sale

*Coming and Going: the Lincoln Highway in Ames* history booklet (\$1.00) and Kay Munsen's *Lake Comar Stories* (\$15.00) have been reprinted and are available for sale at 108 Fifth Street. Both publications are excellent references for unique local stories.

## 4H Assembles Shelving

Each year when the state 4H Conference meets in Ames, all participants donate two hours to community service. This year, Alyssa Staley, Clayton Score, and



David Erickson assembled 970 pounds of used steel shelving for AHS collections stored at the US Bank in campus-town. The cardboard gentleman in the center was no help at all!

# Curator's Column by Dennis Wendell

## Donations to the Collection Highlights of gifts received April-June 2006



- **1908 Souvenir Atlas of Story County** [Grant Quam]
- **Musket used in Civil War** and Ames-related artifacts from the Bruce Adams family [Nancy Adams]
- **Multiple Listing Service (MLS)**

sheets ca. 1975-1996 [Hunziker & Associates]

- Archival materials documenting **Union Story Trust & Savings Bank** [US Bank]
- Original 1919 oil painting by **Velma Wallace Rayness** [Barbara Minear]
- **Collegiate Mfg. Co. stuffed animals** [Fred Vogtlin]
- **Collegiate Mfg. Co. laundry case** used by Edith Sunderlin [Bette Coulson]
- Landscaping plans from **Ames Nursery, 1975-1005** [Brent Buldhaupt]
- Personal papers from the **Hallowell, Johnson, Shepard and Robinson families** [Dorothy Johnson Shepard]



- Personal papers, artifacts and 1,500 **Hallett's/Hayden photos** that documented the transition of Hallett's Quarry to Ada Hayden Heritage Park [Janet Jepeway]

## Collection Storage Space

It may interest members to learn just how critical our need for storage space has become. In addition to the 900 sq. ft. of space at 108 5<sup>th</sup> Street, we have rented space on the second floor immediately above us. Other quarters have been provided by Story County Conservation, Dabble Books in Story City, our neighbor, Pioneer Cleaners, and, most recently, the campus branch of US Bank.

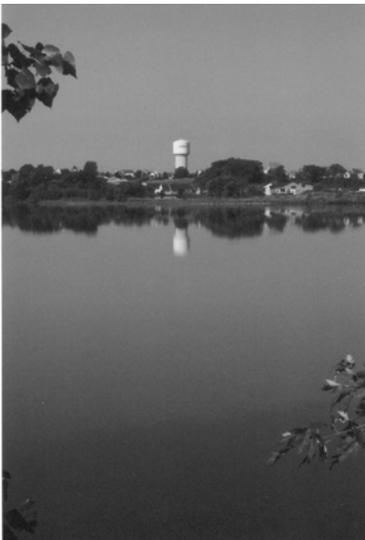
With space is also being used in Nevada and North Ames, you begin to realize why we need a permanent museum with adequate room for all our collections! In early May, Alan Spohnheimer and I drove to Carlisle, Iowa to bring back a trailer load of 1200 pounds of steel shelving. The resulting 72 linear feet of shelves (see 4H story on previous page) will allow us to make more efficient use of valuable space.

## Report on Bertrand and Mary Adams Auction Sale

The July 11<sup>th</sup> issue of *Collectors Journal* (available at Antique Ames) carries a delightful article describing the sale, held May 20<sup>th</sup> by J & J Auction Crew. Regular readers of our newsletter will recall that Mary Adams bequeathed the contents of her home to the Society last year - the largest donation yet received. Abiding by Mrs. Adams' wishes, the artwork, antiques, and 1950s medical equipment were retained by AHS for our future museum, and the remaining household goods were offered at auction.

Whether or not you attended the sale, you will enjoy Patricia McKowen Knight's photos and engaging writing style. The brief biography of Bertrand and Mary, as well as kind words about our Society and Web site combined to provide wonderful exposure for our efforts. A total of \$2,500 was received for goods sold at this and an earlier sale. These funds will be used to restore "*Squabs in a Squall*," an oil painting done by Bertrand Adams in 1932. It was painted at the request of Grant Wood and won honorable mention at the Iowa State Fair that year.

Bert Adams built the house in which he and Mary lived in north Ames. He called it *Prairie Ark*.



## CIA Workshop

No, your Curator has not been recruited as a spy. Rather, he and collections assistant, Alice Mellen, attended an all-day workshop given by the Consortium of Iowa Archivists in Sioux City on June 20<sup>th</sup>. We absorbed much useful information from “Archival Arrangement and Description” and “Care, Handling, Arrangement and Description of Photographs” sessions. The ongoing professional development was most rewarding (though the seven-hour travel time was very tiring).

## Help Our 3<sup>rd</sup> Graders - Call for Volunteers

There is an identified need for the following project. Contact the Curator at 232-2148 or 233-1404 to express your interest.

- **Adapting adult text about Ames history for third-graders.** The Ames schools usually present a unit on local history in the third grade. Because the Society lacks any material specifically written for this level, we would like to invite any former teacher or person familiar with third-grade reading level to adapt existing text for use as curriculum material. This project is one that could be done at home.

## Thanks to Sevde Relocations

The curator would like to recognize and profusely thank Karin Sevde and Sevde Relocations for donating their truck and crew to transport Bert and Mary Adams items from their former home to AHS storage.



Archie Wierson began working at the Goodyear Shoe Repair shop at 107 Welch in 1936 and became partial owner in 1945 when he returned from his WW II overseas service. In 1949, he purchased full ownership and worked for many years with the slogan, *We doctor shoes, heel them and save their soles.*

See AHS website for more about Archie's Shoe Repair

## More Society News

### Dates Set for Border's Books Fundraising Weekend

Mark these dates on your calendar! The Second Annual fundraising weekend at Border's Books in Ames has been set for September 22-24. Discount coupons will be widely distributed for redemption during that time. In addition to discounts for buyers, The Society will receive a percentage of sales. Border's is located at 1200 South Duff in Ames.

### Get Your Own Dinkey T-shirt!

A colorful red t-shirt sporting the narrow gauge train, the “Dinkey”, is for sale at Society headquarters and by mail. It features a drawing of the train on the front, and



All the smoke and cinders that you will ever want.”

the following tongue-in-cheek quote on the back, “All the smoke and cinders you would ever want.”

Printing is in yellow ink. The shirt is \$17, plus postage.

### Bandshell Re-Dedicated

Ames' historic 1935 Bandshell has been refurbished and the park re-landscaped, restoring it and readying it for many years of continued service. A gala re-dedication celebration was held on July 27. The Bandshell has been placed on the National Register of Historic Places and is



actively used for a variety of community events including traditional Thursday night concerts by the Municipal Band in June and July.

### Board Meetings Open

Interested AHS members are welcome at monthly Board meetings, held at 7:15pm on the second Monday of the month at City Hall, usually in Room 135. The Board oversees Society operations and planning and has often been referred to as the “unpaid staff” of the Historical Society.



The Ames Historical Society staffed a booth at the Community Fair at North Grand Mall on April 29. Society administrator, Alan Spohnheimer (left) with assistance from Kathy Svec and Roger Coulson (above) and Dennis Wendell, showcased a number of items from the AHS archives and collections for the enjoyment of visitors. Kids as well as adults tested their wits to guess what things were.

## Building Fund Update

Since establishing a Museum Building Procurement Fund in January 2004, the total continues to grow:

February 2004	\$1,275	March 2005	\$12,350
April 2004	\$2,950	November '05	\$13,126
August 2004	\$3,465	May 2006	\$17,765

## Call for 2006 renewals.

Membership renewals for 2006 are due on the one-year anniversary of last year's payment. See the label on this newsletter for your anniversary date and level.

<b>Introductory - 1st year</b>	<b>\$10</b>	<b>Sustaining</b>	<b>\$100</b>
<b>Individual</b>	<b>\$25</b>	<b>Benefactor</b>	<b>\$500</b>
<b>Family</b>	<b>\$40</b>	<b>Patron</b>	<b>\$1,000</b>
<b>Friend</b>	<b>\$50</b>		

### Additional amount for:

Building Fund \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Operations Endowment \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Send to:

**Ames Historical Society, PO Box 821, Ames, IA 50010**

**Ames Historical Society Member Benefit**  
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