Bloomfield’s Visionary Architects:

Editor’s note:
The dwellings of Bloomfield inform us about who we have been as well as who we are today. They shape us now as they have shaped us since our predecessors first came to this area nearly 200 years ago. Guest writer Julie Fitzpatrick brings us one in a series of the stories behind the people who have added to Bloomfield’s built environment and sense of place.

Clair W. Ditchy, FAIA

A basic wood cottage on the shore of Lake Erie’s Kelleys Island was the birthplace of Clair Ditchy in 1891. From this humble home Ditchy grew up to become president of the American Institute of Architects. A collection of Ditchy-designed homes can be seen today in the Bloomfields, Birmingham, Beverly Hills and Royal Oak. In all, they are charmingly refined and appealing.

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From the Board

Apples are being pressed at Bloomfield’s historic Cider Mill, adding to the signs that the seasons are changing. A warm Fall welcome from the Board to our new and renewing members!

In the spirit of early pioneer harvest celebrations the annual Corn Roast was held at the School Farm. [See the editorial by the Eccentric’s Greg Kowalski on page 4.] Preservation Bloomfield hosts this event to benefit the restoration of the Benjamin Barton Farmhouse and the Craig Log Cabin. The Society (one of the “4-B’s” in Preservation Bloomfield) again assisted in this year’s “bigger and better” happening.

Mi-Kwan-dohn added to the Roast with tales from Bloomfield’s First People.

In 2007, during a Local History/Local Resources program on the Historic Wing Lake Schoolhouse, Board member Lanie Tobin pointed out that Clair W. Ditchy – as Secretary of the American Institute of Architects – signed the Award of Merit honoring the 1948 first classroom addition to the Schoolhouse. In this issue Lanie and her sister Julie Fitzpatrick tell us more about their famous father.

The nation’s remembrance of the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War continues. We’d like to know if the Society’s program Michigan In The Civil War, presented by Al Eicher, inspired you to do some research into an ancestor’s role in the War? Tell us what you learned at info@bloomfieldhistoricalsociety.org.

If you’d like to volunteer on any of our projects, let us know via our e-mail above.

See you at September’s program, If Woodward Avenue Could Talk, and please bring along any souvenirs you might have collected during the original cruises – photos, a menu from Teds or … ?
Society member Harry C. Walsh challenged us to guess the purpose of this building which sits at the entrance to his property.

You could almost imagine Goldilocks opening the red door of the small Tudoresque cottage. But finding the answer to the challenge was less Goldilocks and more Alice leading us into Waterland as we dived into the history of how the Township got its water supply system.

**Earliest times**

Today we take for granted the existence of a ready supply of fresh running water in our houses but it wasn't always this way. Native Americans and early settlers obtained their water from streams, lakes and springs. As soon as they could, pioneer farmers dug wells and hauled water up with buckets tied to ropes. Hand pumps on the top of long pipes drilled down to the water table replaced the ropes and buckets. Eventually, many farms used windmills to drive the pump handles to raise the water.

Once electricity was available each farm or home had an electric pump providing a more reliable source of water supply.

**Well Houses**

As the Township evolved from farmland to suburbia an interim solution was developed – a series of subdivision-sized community well-water distribution systems. Harry explained that as recently as the early 1960s many areas had well water delivered through a system of pipes from a community well that served up to a hundred homes or more. The well was housed in a well (or pump) house. **Harry’s “cottage” was one of the first well houses in the Township** supplying water to the subdivision of Bloomfield Village. It was located on Tuckahoe near the Bloomfield Village School. The Village system was built as early as 1925. In a promotional booklet in the late 1920s developer Judson Bradway wrote, "Water mains are laid. Clear water is pumped from a well which has a capacity of over a million gallons a day....".

In the late 1970s the original frame pump house had become obsolete, in poor repair and about to be demolished when Harry volunteered to have it moved to his property. He was given the building, had it moved on the bed of a truck, then paid two high school boys to make necessary repairs.

**The system in the 60s**

Wayne Domine, Township Director of Engineering and Environmental Services was able to provide a map titled, “Proposed Additions to Water Systems, Township of Bloomfield”, revised March 1963. The map shows fifteen existing distribution systems with associated well houses and distribution lines in various subdivisions. Two of the systems even had elevated tanks to hold the water (Birmingham Farms and Bloomfield Village). Those that did not have elevated tanks had large capacity pressurized holding tanks – as much as 30 feet long and holding thousands of gallons – contained within the well houses. Other community well water distribution systems such as Foxcroft and Wing Lake Shores do not appear on this map — and may turn out to be another story. Interestingly, construction plans noted: “Building shell of pump house must conform to architecture of adjacent residences.”

**Changeover to “city” water**

When Bloomfield Township began switching to the City of Detroit system in 1964, it was a simple matter to connect the infrastructure of pipes that had been delivering the well water to the new water main that passed by the pump house.

**Well House #5** was located on the property of John Reddy. After the pump was obsolete, the Reddys used the well house for many years to store yard equipment. Late in 1995 they replaced the well house with a new garage.

Most of the well houses were demolished and the lots on which they stood used for new residences.
Ditchy — Continued from page 1

The beginning of the architect’s career unfolded at the University of Michigan. He first earned a degree in English literature (1911) and then pursued another in architecture (1915). During these years, he painted signs to pay for his tuition.

After graduation, he was promptly hired by the prestigious Albert Kahn Architectural Firm in Detroit. Although Ditchy enjoyed this special career opportunity, the country was engaged in World War I and he felt a strong patriotic duty to do his part. In 1917, he enlisted and was sent to France with the American Expeditionary Force where he taught French soldiers a working vocabulary in American English, including terms for military practices and equipment. Fluent in French, he thoroughly enjoyed his two years teaching soldiers and living in a French village.

Ditchy returned to Kahn’s office at the end of the war, but set out on his own two years later. A sign of their continuing good relationship was the fact that Kahn, when possible, sent business to Ditchy during the Great Depression, when projects were scarce. He focused the early years of his practice on the design of houses - small, large, private - even public, such as Brewster and Parkside Public Housing Projects in Detroit.

The young architect purchased property in Birmingham when he married Berenice Bookmyer in 1920. His intention of designing a home for his future family there never came to fruition and the couple continued to live in Royal Oak. He had three daughters: Diane, Lanie and Julie. Ironically, the president of the American Architects and Architectural Society was his wife Berenice. The president of the American Architects and Architectural Society was his wife Berenice. As Ditchy continued his passionate support of the architectural profession, he was sought after as an amusing and erudite public speaker — always wearing his signature bow-tie and a genial smile. He enjoyed introducing Frank Lloyd Wright on several occasions and hosted “the Great One” at a small family dinner at the Detroit Athletic Club one year. The guests were Olgivanna and Frank Wright, Berenice and Clair Ditchy, and two of the Ditchys’ daughters.

In 1935, as the Great Depression waned, the Federal Housing Administration called for an effort to promote the building of private residences and improve standards of design. In response to this need, Ditchy and three colleagues established the Small House Associates of Detroit and Ditchy went on to lead the Small House Architects of Michigan as president. Obviously an expert on the subject by this time, he was summoned to Washington to speak before Congress. As the years went by, Ditchy expanded his focus from small or medium-size houses to large civic, religious and institutional buildings. For his alma mater he designed the Alice Crocker Lloyd residence hall. The first construction on the university’s campus following the conclusion of World War II, the project was challenged by scarcity of resources in that postwar period. However, it was acclaimed for its style and ambience, particularly the use of natural light. Ditchy chose attractive, modern furnishings for the students’ rooms.

In 1944, when Ditchy was accepted as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, the citation read “An outstanding architect of splendid character, high ideals and unusual executive ability.” Soon after, an article in National Architect Magazine (Nov. 1945) stated, “During his extensive period of practice, Ditchy has become one of the best known and best liked architects in the nation.”

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In Ditchy’s final years, he received two gold medals from architectural societies, two honorary degrees from universities, several honorary memberships in foreign architectural institutes, and invitations to lead international architectural tours.

Ditchy’s legacy remains woven into the fabric of our area.

Julie Fitzpatrick

Images provided by Lanie Tobin
Legacy

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Filling in the cracks
At The Craig Log Cabin

Over the summer Society members John Marshall, Dave Bogart and Larry Trinkaus, along with Preservation Bloomfield’s Dave Baumhart and Brian Kepes, have been “chinking” the spaces between the logs of the cabin in preparation for “daubing” – the final weather-sealing step in making the historic cabin secure. Chinking uses small scraps of wood to provide a firm base for the traditional materials of the daubing paste that include lime, sand and horsecue. Weather permitting – always a caveat in Michigan – a group of Boy Scouts will join with them to take on the task of daubing early in October.

Inside, the newly installed floor was milled from logs obtained when the Township campus was enlarged a few years ago. They have been seasoning in storage until needed.

The floor marks the end of the “adaptive reuse” of the logs that began with some of the wood being used in the restoration of the Historic Wing Lake Schoolhouse.

Learning from our history

As if on cue, the clouds parted and the rain stopped falling just as the annual corn roast to benefit the Barton farmhouse and Craig log cabin began Sunday.

What followed was an afternoon of music, good food and fun for everyone. In the end, Preservation Bloomfield, the group that is spearheading the efforts to save the historical buildings, raised about $8,000. Overall, that’s a modest sum. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been raised to restore the buildings and more is needed.

But much has already been accomplished. Some in the community have questioned if the Bloomfield Hills school district should even be a part of this venture, given the precarious state of school finances these days. The farmhouse and log cabin both are on the grounds of the Charles Bowers School Farm. In fact, some have questioned if the district should even operate the farm.

The answer to all of that is yes. Regarding the buildings, they are a part of our history, our heritage and can offer valuable lessons on the importance of community. That is one area where our education system fails terribly. Nowhere do we teach how important it is to respect and understand our own communities and how important it is to take an active role in preserving them. That is as important as teaching math and science. Perhaps more so.

In their own way, the Barton farmhouse and Craig log cabin can help accomplish that. They aren’t just buildings. They are teaching tools.

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Learning from our history

The Bloomfield Historical Society is dedicated to fostering an appreciation of the rich history of the Bloomfield area by identifying, promoting and conserving our heritage. We encourage research to educate and engage all generations.

www.bloomfieldhistoricalsociety.org
info@bloomfieldhistoricalsociety.org