

# Frozen Water Sales Thrived

The present-day boom in marketing the "most abundant substance on earth" to a voracious public willing to shell out more than a dollar for a bottle of water is a recent phenomenon, but not entirely without precedent. As is the case today, supply, demand and convenience were waiting for a movement of business-savvy entrepreneurs to create an industry, and create they did...in this case an ice industry.

The "frozen water trade" (to coin the title of Gavin Weightman's 2004 book on the national ice industry) was not only an integral part of everyday life for many people of the past—and one which is utterly absent today—but was a financial and economic powerhouse as few today might imagine.

The ice industry had its start in the 19th century; it hit Culver by or before the early 1880s. By 1882, at least, we know that Indianapolis businessman Sterling Holt — who became involved in the Indianapolis Ice Company in

1876 — was operating an ice house on the west shore of Lake Maxinkuckee, just north of the outlet, near today's Verl Shaffer residence on South Street.

According to the late David Burns, who addressed a group of Boy Scouts about the ice houses around 1984, a hill had been created along the shore out of corncobs, known locally as (appropriately enough) "Cob Hill" (The practice of generating needed elevations using corncobs was not as outlandish in those days as it might sound; rumor has it that the area of the Culver Academies campus on which the dining hall sits today may have some cob-based elevation.).

With Sam Medbourn as manager, this ice house was probably the first, though certainly not the last, of Culver's several ice houses. In one of a series of Culver history articles in the *Culver Citizen* in 1974-75, John

Houghton interviewed Bill Easterday about his father's work in constructing this ice house, which he said was accomplished "by digging out the site with a horse-drawn scraper (This was a thing like the shovel of a bulldozer, attached to some rigging so that the horse could pull it across the ground, scraping up dirt as it went)."

What is stunning about the ice business, even before 1900, was the sheer magnitude of product and employment—it generated. A cover story headline in the *Marmont Herald* (the precursor to the *Culver Citizen*, in the days when Culver was still Marmont) declared, "Ice for Millions...Over Four Hundred Car Loads Cut Thus Far This Season (and not half of the ice houses filled yet...an industry that is a God-send to the laboring men in the winter)."

The claim that the ice industry was a "God-send" to local laborers was no exaggeration, especially considering that a great many in Culver were farmers or manual laborers in those days; winters

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Two workers use tongs to handle ice in this view depicting Culver's ice industry in the 1930s. (Photo from Sherill Fujimura collection)

could be economically tough. In a January 2008 article in the Culver Citizen, 100-year-old Ferris Zechiel recalled his father rising before sunrise to walk to Culver from Burr Oak to work all day in the ice house (by then the Medbourn house on Jefferson Street). Local men, it was said, were given first chance and first pick of tools. Those who could bring their own tools and work stood a better chance of a day's pay than those without. The 1895 article continues:

"One of the greatest industries in Marmont is the ice business, as thousands of car loads are taken from the lake during the winter months, and in the summer ice is transported to the larger cities. Col. S. R. Holt, of Indianapolis, the 'ice king,' has already nine large ice houses here and we are reliably informed, will erect a dozen or more during the summer. The ice cut from Maxinkuckee Lake is of superior quality and brings a higher price in the market. During the harvesting of the ice, from two to three hundred men are employed, that is when running a full force, and it is not only a bonanza for the laboring men in this place, but scores of farmers have the opportunity to earn a little extra 'change' which comes in handy, especially at this time of the year...from \$1.00 to \$1.50 per day is paid to the men, and when we say about \$15,000 is left here every year, the outside world can readily see the magnitude of this mammoth industry "

Indeed, the employment of as many as 300 men in the ice house was nothing to laugh at; nor was a profit of

\$15,000 in the years before the turn of the century.

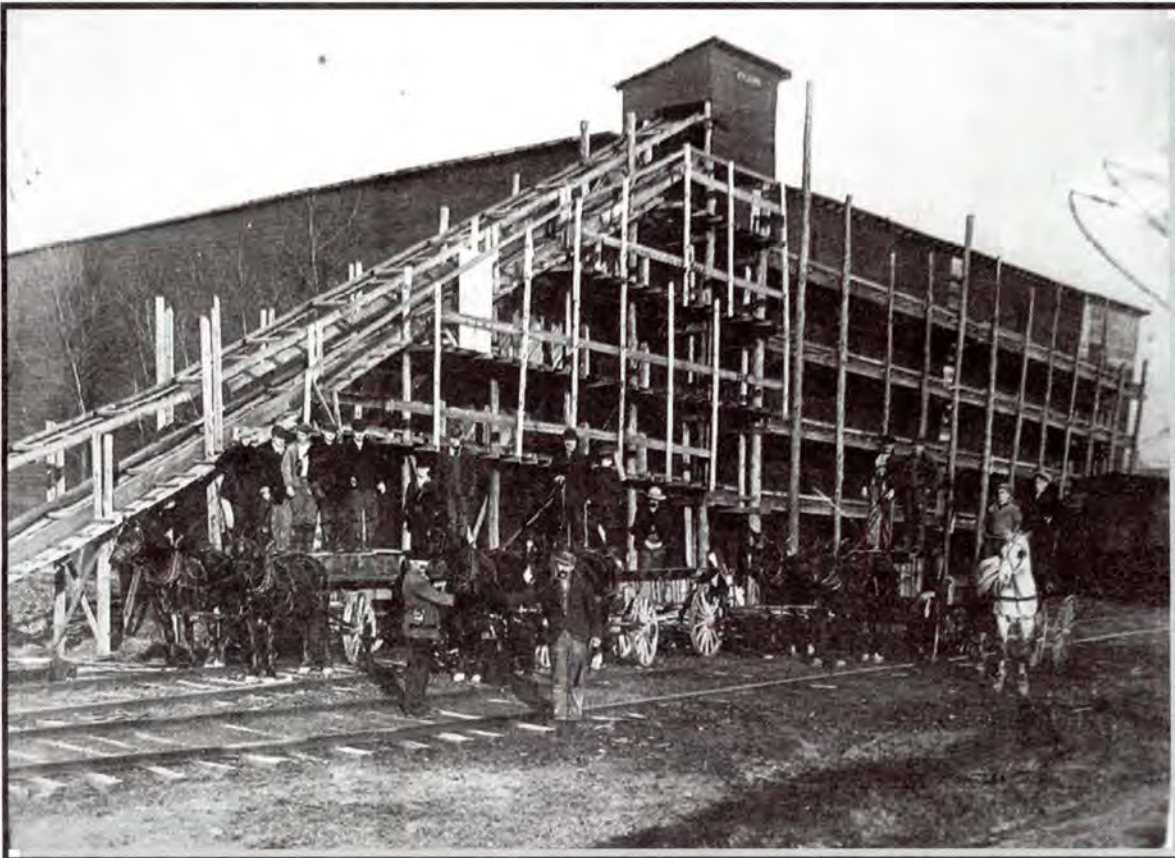
### A "Field" Made of Water

Equally amazing is the methodology employed in harvesting the ice, in an era before electricity and many of the labor-saving machines of today. According to John Houghton's research, ice had to be at least nine inches thick to be harvested, and Dave Burns described a "field" of ice extending out several hundred yards square from the two-foot wide channel that started close to the ice house on shore.

"This channel increased," wrote Houghton, "to three or four times its original width after it was a few yards long; farther out still, the channel was widened again. At this point, the first field was cut. Each additional field was cut away from one edge of an earlier field."

He continued:

"The ice to be cut was first scored by an ice plow, a set of spikes a little bit like a harrow, which left grooves about a foot and a half apart behind them as they were pulled across the ice by a horse. The plows were taken back and forth in the same grooves until the ice was more than half cut through. This scoring was done in perpendicular directions, so that a checker board pattern was made, with each square one and a half feet on a side. Each of these squares would become a one hundred and twenty pound block of ice...after a considerable area of ice (called a field) had been scored, large pieces (containing as many squares as could be managed at once) were broken loose along the scored lines with saws and pike-poles. These large chunks were then pushed up the channel towards the shore; men standing on planks put over the channel like bridges at each of the narrowing points, used pike-poles again to break the ice into sets of squares small enough to fit into the next part of the channel. The last of these men produced pieces one square wide and several squares long, which were shoved on in to shore."



An early view of the Medbourn ice operation illustrates the use of horses and the elaborate system of transferring ice from the ice house to a waiting train.

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Those unfamiliar

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with the ice operation are often startled at how elaborate was not only the effort itself, but the technology used in the process. Burns described the ice harvest as generally occurring during a period of two to three weeks, with workers in shifts working even through the night. In those pre-electric days, said Burns, carbide lighting was employed. By using calcium carbide and a large, reflective sheet (technology used for lighthouses and mining in the 19th century), Burns said the ice house and portions of the ice field could be lit "as bright as day." Further, an elaborate, massive conveyer system weighing several tons was implemented to bring the ice from the channels into the ice house. A 1,200-foot-long belt of iron links with oak four-by-fours fastened across it at regular intervals, the steam engine-powered structure was quite a sight to behold. Burns noted several times that as long as the ice was kept moving, it was manageable (blocks weighed over 100 pounds each); if they stopped moving, they were a job to budge!

Surprising also to the uninitiated was the ability to keep ice readily on hand -and frozen -throughout the year, so that those needing ice could still expect a hearty supply on the hottest days of summer. The ice was kept, of course, in ice "houses," a simple building divided (at least in the case of Medbourn's) into what John Houghton described as "eight rooms, each 120 feet long and 80 feet wide. The front of each room had openings at several lev-

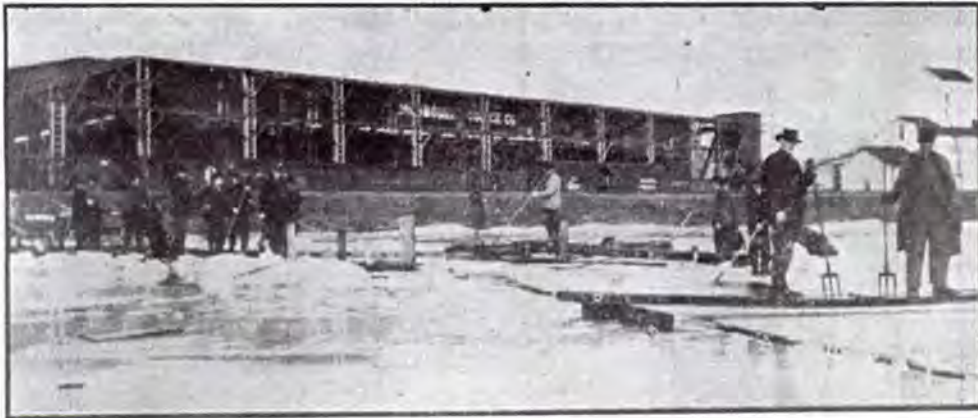
els from top to bottom...there was neither a roof nor a floor. The first layer of ice lay on the ground; the top layer was covered with marsh hay. Yet only the outside four or five inches of each of these layers melted during storage."

Marsh hay differed, said Burns, from regular hay. He said it was harvested west of Culver in the area of today's State Road 10, and was important as an insulator to prevent melting of the ice.

Wrote Houghton, "When the house was being filled, a man (called a 'puller') stood in front of the lowest door into each room. His job was to use a pike-pole to pull ice from the conveyer belt onto a slide which led into his room. When the lowest level in all of the rooms had been filled, the belt was lifted so that it would pass in front of the second level doors, and the process began again."

Besides being shipped in hundreds of trainloads to cities as far away as Indianapolis, Mishawaka and Logansport, "pure Maxinkuckee ice" was, of course, sold around town for use in pre-refrigeration ice boxes. Recalled Culver's John Bigley:

"In the early days each home had an ice chest or ice box...a horse-drawn wagon filled with cakes of ice went through the area supplying the homes and businesses with ice. Each home had a card to display in the window showing the ice man whether they wanted 25, 50 or 100 pounds (Continued on Page 4)



## MEDBOURN ICE COMPANY

WHOLESALE AND RETAIL DEALERS IN

PURE LAKE MAXINKUCKEE ICE

LONG DISTANCE TELEPHONE

CULVER, INDIANA

A 1920s advertisement for the Medbourn ice house on East Jefferson Street shows a lakeside view of the ice house and gives some indication of the size of the operation.

of ice in their box, which was usually on the back porch. The ice man had a leather shoulder pad on his shoulder to protect him from the melting, chilling ice, which he held in place with ice tongs.

"There was always a following of children to pick up or to beg for small pieces of ice to crunch or suck on. The ice man was an artisan with the ice pick. He could cut the block to the desired weight without weighing it. I remember Ed Hawk delivering ice for many years, and I know many other Culverites will remember him."

John Edward Werner, in his "Memoirs," had similar recollections:

"The ice business was always an interesting operation for the kids to watch, both in the winter and summer, and I can remember many hours spent watching and playing at the ice house, many times picking out small pieces of cool ice to suck on. In the winter we had to be very careful about the large open spots that were left when the ice was removed or we might get an unwelcome dunking in the cold water until these open areas froze over again. If we did fall in we just climbed out and went home as fast as we could where our mother, who was glad to see us unhurt, would take off the clothes that were frozen stiff and replace them with warm dry things. We must have been a worry for our dear mothers."

Reportedly in 1915 another ice house was erected in an area near the first, this one north of the corner of South and Wabash Streets in a large depression that Dave Burns said was called "the hole" (In more recent years a house has been built there, but it stood empty for some years prior.).

As of 1896, there were reportedly nine ice house in Culver with a total storage capacity of 30,000 tons. This listing would have taken into account that each "ice house" operation may have included several individual



**This scene on Lake Maxinkuckee shows a horse apparently outfitted for "scoring" the ice. Horses were fitted with special spiced shoes to prevent slipping while walking on ice.**

buildings, or ice houses, even though the operation was a single one. It may or may not have included smaller houses like the one built by Miller Dairy owner D. W. Miller on Culver's south side to assist him in his dairy operation, one of several smaller operations not intended for mass sale or shipping.

In December 1906, it was reported that Samuel E. Medbourn was planning an ice house 140 by 120 feet and 40 feet high, in the East Jefferson Street area, in the vicinity of today's Culver Cove resort; this would be the longest-lasting of Culver's ice houses and probably the best-known to residents of today who recall the ice industry, and who would have known it as the Medbourn ice house. Samuel E. Medbourn's great contribution to the local ice industry occurred here.

John Houghton: "Holt's ice house was cut off from the lake by the railroad tracks (as any building between the outlet and Jefferson Street would be). This meant that the ice had to be carried over the tracks. In Holt's system, the ice was broken into blocks at the water's edge, and there loaded on a conveyor belt which carried it over the railroad to the ice house, down to the lakeshore. This meant

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that work had to be halted and the tracks cleared of fallen ice every time a train was due. At that time, a drainage ditch ran down Madison Street through what was then a swamp behind the present sites (as of the 1970s -today the Cove) of the Park and Shop parking lot and the Farm Bureau Co-op. It continued under the railroad tracks and down to the lake shore. Medbourn realized that no efficient harvesting could be done as long as the work had to stop for trains, and he saw that this opening under the railroad was just what he needed. He bought up the swamp, built an ice house on it and used the ditch (along with his natural talent for business) to such advantage that he was soon able to buy out the competition and become the proprietor of both of Culver's ice houses. After the Medbourn Ice Company became a prosperous enterprise, cement channels were built to lead from the house, under the railroad, to the lake at each of the sites."

The aforementioned cement channels existed well into the 1980s and even the 1990s, though they have since been removed.

Judi Burns' website lists a wide array of amazing statistics regarding the volume of ice harvested from the lake during those boom years of the ice business.

February 1897: 26,000 tons of ice was harvested in 15 days! Price per ton for ice was \$1 and profit from the ice harvest was \$20,000. One hundred men had been employed at \$1.25 per day making total labor cost \$1,900. 12 to 15 train car loads of ice were shipped out every day in April 1897. In 1899, 15,000 car loads of ice were harvested, and in February 1907, 34 train cars were loaded and sent out, with 40 filled the day before. "Medbourn has an open order for 50 cars a day as long as the ice lasts," reported the Rochester Sentinel of February 16. That year, 40,000 tons (not pounds) of ice was harvested from the lake with the lake nearly covered in ice by October 10.

It was reported that in 1908, the ice gangs" were paid



**The Ferrier ice house on Lake Maxinkuckee's West Shore, above and below, fell victim to severe windstorm in 1908.**



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off in gold, an occurrence that David Burns recalled himself (indicating that 1908 was almost certainly not the last or only year for the gold payout). That same year, the Sentinel reported that the "Medbourn ice gang is averaging about 1,350 tons (of ice) a day. The three rooms of the house are full, and a good start has been made on the new room which is under construction. Three or four days more will complete the work and the loading of cars will be taken up."

In May 1908, J. O. Ferrier bought the Maxinkuckee Lake Ice Co. for \$24,000, including 6 acres of land and 11,000 tons of ice, with E. C. Hawk as manager of the company. This would have been the ice house on the south side of Culver, which many early abstracts refer to as "Ferrier's Addition." (It was the Ferriers who reportedly christened many of the streets in that area of town with Spanish names, having visited Florida and been enamored with the Cuban culture there.)

That same year, according to Evermann and Clark's landmark book, **Lake Maxinkuckee: Physical and Biological Survey**, a "pretty severe wind storm" blew down Ferrier's ice houses, which were empty at the time and offered little wind resistance. David Burns reported that the ice houses there were torn down in 1915.

But the ice house of greatest longevity was the Medbourn house, or at least it's the one best remembered by the many Culverites who recall the days when frozen

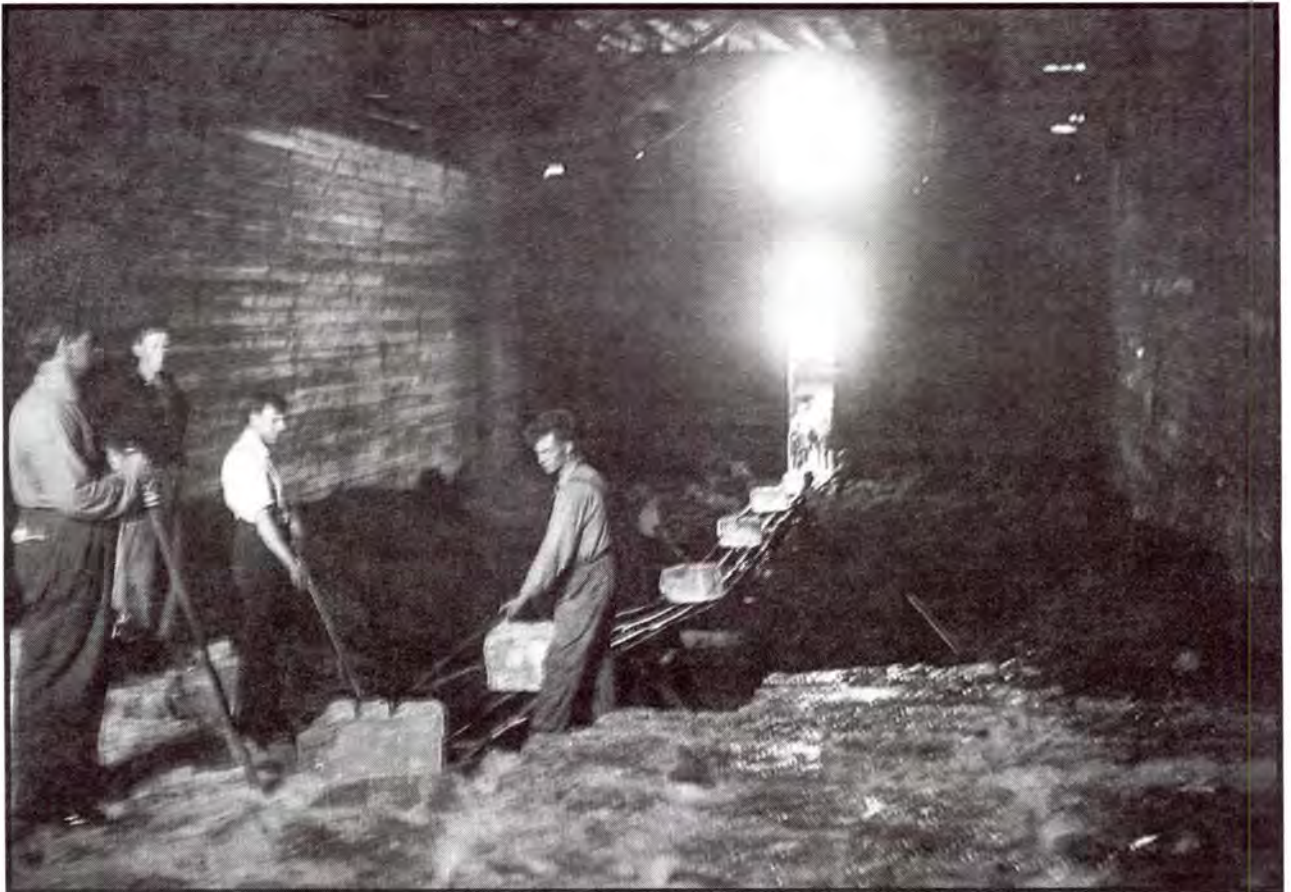
water was a booming business in Culver, besides an important economic aid during the cold winter months. Ferris Zechiel, who turns 100 this June, remembers his father — a farmer with little gainful work in the chilly depths of winter — finishing his farm chores before dawn and trudging a mile or two into Culver with tools in hand to work from sunup to sundown in the Medbourn ice house.

Ironically, a badly-needed project for workers hit hard by the Depression would ultimately signal the doom of the longstanding economy of ice in Culver. As WPA projects spread electricity across the land, refrigerators, of course, gradually replaced old-fashioned ice boxes, and while a small "ice house" existed on West Jefferson Street for decades after, the last ice harvest on the lake was in 1937.

In many ways, March 23, 1943, was the final death knell for Culver's "ice age," when the Medbourn ice house — the last commercial house in Culver — burned to the ground at an estimated \$5,000 loss.

Amazingly, Dave Burns claimed that in all of those years of ice harvesting — approximately 1880 to 1937 — only one year saw little or no ice harvested from the lake, and that was 1936. The reason? Not the ice-less winters we have seen in recent years, but instead ice so thick that saws couldn't cut deep enough into it to harvest it properly. How times have changed.

-Jeff Kenney



A crew moves ice blocks inside the Medbourn ice house with the help of the conveyor.

# Progress Continues on Center for Culver History

Progress has been continuing on several fronts this winter on the plan of the Antiquarian and Historical Society to open a history museum on the lower level of the Carnegie Library building in downtown Culver.

The spaces that will be occupied by a history museum and a research center have been renovated and decorated in a manner that complements the newer portions of the library while maintaining the traditional Carnegie Library ambience.

A wall separating the two sections of the Center for Culver History will be capped with wood matching the wainscoting that extends around the museum room.

Meanwhile, the library has nearly completed the entrance that will be used by both researchers and museum visitors. The new entrance is very attractive and will lead to handicapped-accessible facilities in the area where we will develop the museum.

The Museum Committee has been in touch with professional museum designer Ted Swigon, who is to meet soon with the committee to discuss an outline of possible aspects of the community to be included in the exhibits.

Fund-raising activities are also beginning. A major gifts campaign will be under the direction of Ellen Gignilliat. It will be followed by a community-wide campaign that will be directed toward making everyone in the community aware of the next project of the Antiquarian and Historical Society.

The accessions committee has approved the acquisition of a number of items that will be used in museum displays. The society is grateful for the items that have been offered so far and hopes that others will be forthcoming, particularly as the museum design makes apparent the kinds of artifacts that will help to tell the story of the Town of Culver, the Culver Academies, Lake Maxinkuckee and the surrounding countryside.

Much time and effort have gone into the progress that has taken place so far. Those who have not seen the introductory exhibit the Museum Committee prepared in the foyer of the Culver-Union Township Public Library should be sure to stop in at the library to look at it the next time they are downtown on Main Street. We also encourage visitors to look at the beautiful space that has been created on the lower level of the original library to make way for the museum.

Comments are welcome too, as we expect the museum to represent and serve the whole community.

The Antiquarian and Historical Society has hired its first staff person, Doug Tolson, who can be found in the office next to the research area on most mornings during the week. He is capable in the use of computers and a valuable addition to the efforts to which we are committed.

The library also has a new staff person, Colleen

Carpenter, who will be working with us in the library's history and genealogy sections.

The tempo of the museum development should pick up with the return of warmer weather and the members and friends of the Antiquarian and Historical Society who have been away for the winter.

The society's goal is to create a place that will tell the story of the community we share and the people and events that have made it what it is. We hope the museum itself will become an attraction that will draw visitors to the community and help to make its history known.

This is the most ambitious project the Antiquarian Society has undertaken. Although it will be a major project, anything less would not do justice to the history of our unique community. It should be noted that exhibits will be constructed in such a way that they could be moved to a new location at some time in the future.

The Antiquarian Society is also committed to working with other institutions and organizations that have a similar interest in preserving the history of this corner of Indiana.

We have already received helpful advice from the Indiana Historical Society, and we have kept in touch with the Marshall County Historical Society and the Wythougan Valley Preservation Council, two of the groups that have a county-wide vision for preserving the past.

We look forward to working with the Culver Academies in telling the history of the Academies to a wider audience. We are especially grateful to the Academies for the donation of a number of items that have become a part of our collection even before the opening of the museum.

To all of our volunteers and everyone who has helped us -too numerous to mention -we offer our sincere thanks.

## YEARLY DUES \$30.00

Send 2008 dues to the Antiquarian and Historical Society,  
P.O. Box 125, Culver, IN 46511-0125

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Antiquarian & Historical Society of Culver Spring 2008 Newsletter

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**NEWSLETTER  
SPRING 2008**

**Antiquarian and Historical Society  
P.O. Box 125  
Culver, Indiana 46511-0125**

## The President's Report

I am often asked by my friends why I am putting so much time and effort into the Antiquarian Society.

I am sure that you are asked the same questions, especially by your family and by yourself. After all, we are not serving and supporting crippled children, like the Lions, or our armed forces, or our churches, or the fight against breast cancer.

Our purpose is a little more subtle but not less important. We are serving our fellow man by preserving and promoting the historic significance of the community of which they are a part. By bringing the past alive we are making our current experiences here more valuable and to a degree our lives more meaningful.

I compare it to the pride we take when our college team wins a football game. Being a part of that university community enriches our lives. It brings with it psychological joy and health.

Recently, Dorothy and I had dinner with Kay Tusing. She was relating how she had taken her grandchildren out on the ice in front of the town park to take pictures of the new lighthouse. She told them the story of how they lit the lighthouse to signal to the cottages on the lake that the train had arrived at the station.

The grandchildren asked questions about the town's his-

tory, and they confided that they were very proud to live in Culver. Those grandchildren have a little more self confidence, are a little more optimistic about the future, because they are a part of a wonderful story. I know my children and grandchildren take great pride in their Culver connection.

Kay said that, although she was in Texas when the first lighthouse was torn down, she cried bitterly when she heard the news.

Later, when she came to the dedication of the replacement, her heart swelled with pride.

This is an example of the effect that members of the society are having on so many people. You may not be curing cancer, but you are providing a value service to your neighbors.

What you guys have done over the years has been nothing short of phenomenal. I have never been a part of a better team of people. I am very proud to be associated with you.

Some day we may write our own history, from the front porch show-and-tell programs to the opening of the Center for Culver History. and beyond.

Essentially, it will be the story of the Antiquarian and Historical Society members who unselfishly gave so much to the community that they love.

**-Jim Peterson**