

## The Book Club: a Topeka Tradition

While the community celebrates the opening of its new 6,000 square foot state of the art branch library, Topeka has had a long literary history. It was April 13, 1939, the Great Depression still had a grip on the nation, when the Topeka Book Club held it's first meeting. The brainchild of Mary Jane Seagly (mother of Jean Crouse), membership was restricted to 15. A number of her non-reader friends said that "it would never go over". But for over 50 years the group met on a monthly basis reviewing both fiction and non-fiction works.

One of the requirements for membership was that each member had to take their turn reviewing a book and/or hosting the meetings. Initially members didn't realize how much work it took to put a review together. But the effort was appreciated and the monthly meetings resulted in enduring friendships. In a 1988 Goshen News article Mary Jane told the reporter that, "We had meetings once a month, but we stipulated that we would not do a lot of housekeeping, such as washing curtains. We were just to be 'literary'".

Through the decades of the 1940s and 1950s the book club made numerous financial donations to groups like the USO, Red Cross, Cancer Fund, Heart Fund and the LaGrange County Hospital. In the 1960s the club sponsored the local Girl Scout troop. Interestingly enough the funds were raised through guest fees (25¢) from those ladies who wanted to attend but didn't want to join because they didn't want to prepare a book review, and from periodic offerings.

Sadly after nearly 50 years, 514 meetings and the review of some 500 books the Topeka Book Club's membership had declined to only five. One of which was 94 year old Mary Jane Seagly, the only charter member to remain active throughout the life of the club. Times had changed, more women were working outside of the home and very few were willing to put the work into reviewing a book. Fifteen past and present members attended the final meeting on Tuesday evening, May 17, 1988, in what is now the Peoples Federal Bank basement on West Lake Street in Topeka. Of course Mary Jane was there along with fellow charter member Claudia Stoltz. Also in attendance were the current president Janice Gingerich, Ruth Johns, Debra Kauffman, Genevieve Lehman, Amanda Rempel, Mary Bontrager, and Linda Zehr.

Not only did Mary Jane recall the first meeting and book she reviewed for the club "My Son, My Son" by Howard Spring, she also remembered her last review given in 1987. It was the book entitled "A Summons To Memphis" by Pulitzer prize winning author Peter Taylor. And to quote Mary Jane, "It was a wonderful book!"



Mary Jane Seagly



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### "Give the Children Fresh Air"

For many years Topeka was an exciting summer adventure destination for many children from the inner city of Chicago. In the early 1900s workers at the 26<sup>th</sup> Street Mennonite Mission began arranging for their Sunday School members to spend two weeks during the summer with rural Mennonite families in Indiana, Illinois, and Iowa. By 1910, rail passenger service from Chicago to Topeka made this area an ideal location to send children for what Chicago Mennonites called a "Summer Outing". Over the years the program came to be called "Fresh Air", but the idea apparently wasn't original to the Mennonites.

In 1877, Rev. Willard Parsons, a minister in a small rural church in Sherman, Pennsylvania began asking members of his congregation to provide a summer vacation for some of New York City's neediest children. New York was overflowing with poor children living in crowded tenements. Many of these youngsters were hit by the tuberculosis epidemic. And since "fresh air" was considered the best cure for



respiratory ailments, the cry became, "Give the children a breath of fresh air". An independent not-for-profit organization was formed, but by 1881 the work had expanded far beyond Parsons' expectations and additional funding was needed. Those funds came from the New York Tribune. In 1888, the fund's name was changed to "The Tribune Fresh Air Fund". After more than 130 years the "Fresh Air" program continues to this day and has benefited more than 1.7 million needy children.

Apparently Mennonite mission workers in Chicago took note of the benefits and the success of the two week summer program and adapted it as a tool for evangelism. In the booklet entitled "After Ten Years" mission superintendent A.M. Eash recorded what was subtitled "A Brief Report of the First Ten Years of Work of the Twenty-sixth Street Mennonite Mission" (1906-1916). [editors note: That brief report was, however, over 100 pages long and sold for 35 cents.] The booklet is filled with pictures; one of which is a group of children on the platform of the Topeka depot waiting for the train that will take them back to Chicago. Across the bottom of the picture are the words "Homeward Bound" with a caption that reads, "Happy, after a few weeks in the country". The booklet is the property of TAHS Secretary Robert Coon who served as a Mennonite pastor in Chicago.

While the picture carries no date (that depot was destroyed by fire on July 15, 1911) and no individuals were identified, it does provide several fascinating bits of information. First, the photo actually shows passengers on the platform in Topeka. Second, the small signs on either end of the larger Topeka sign corrects a misconception. Many believed that the 146 mile marker in front the Depot Museum signified the rail miles to Chicago. It was in fact the distance to Detroit while Chicago was only 126 miles by rail. *Continued on page 2*

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## Quilted Excellence: The Topeka Quilt Show & Sale

For generations women in this area have been quilters. It started with the early settlers who brought their quilted treasures with them. In those early days they weren't necessarily considered treasures, but they were a necessity of life. You had to make do with what you had. Nothing could be wasted. Your survival depended on it. Besides, quilting bees were a great opportunity to escape the isolation of homemaking, catching up on the latest gossip, and still feel like one had created something that would serve the family and future generations. Today Topeka hosts one of the longest running quilt shows in the Midwest.

When Sue (Mrs. Carl) Christner of Honeyville heard about another community in the area hosting a quilt show it started her thinking. "Why not here?" So she started talking about a possible show in 1974. That was all it took. Quilters started to respond and 94 quilts were put on display at the first Susanna's Quilt Show held in the Honeyville Store. Reportedly over 250 people showed up for the one day event. Adequate space quickly became an issue.

When Shipshewana State Bank (now Peoples Federal Savings) built a branch in Topeka, Sue decided to move the show and sale to the community room in the bank basement. Doris Haggard and Genevieve Lehman from the Topeka United Methodist Church pitched in and began helping Sue manage the growing event.

When the Methodists completed their new fellowship hall in 1984, Sue asked the Methodist ladies if they would consider sponsoring the annual show. They accepted the offer and the Topeka Quilt Sale & Show was located there through 2007. By that time the annual event was becoming more than the church ladies could handle so they approached Eden Worship Center which is located in the old Honeyville School about taking over and hosting the quilt show. With the help of Martha Snyder and Doris Haggard from the Methodist Church, the 34<sup>th</sup> Annual Topeka Quilt Sale & Show moved back home to Honeyville.

During one of the early years of the quilt show, the organizers discovered the "Topeka Rose" quilt design and adopted it as their logo. In 1992, Genevieve Lehman, Doris Haggard, Sue Christner, and Rosalie (Dintaman) Yoder of Topeka, along with Anne Retter of Wolcottville formed The Topeka Rose Quilters.

Quilting is alive and well in the Topeka community and the future looks bright. Last year over 400 visitors and exhibitors attend the three day event in late June. Quilters from across the nation send their quilted items both for sale and display. The quilt show operates on commissions from sales and a nominal admissions fee. The proceeds have been used to help fund a variety of charities and missions projects. The 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Topeka Quilt Show & Sale will take place June 24-27, 2009 in conjunction with the 1st Annual Shipshewana Quilt Festival. Organizers are expecting well over 1,000 visitors.



### Fresh Air cont.

As early as 1907, the Chicago mission began to send some of their 300 children to the country. In his report Eash makes it clear that this "Fresh Air Program" was tended both as reward and as a tool for evangelism. The value to the program was clearly evident in Superintendent Eash's comments. "For some these two weeks lengthen out into two or more months. The children get into touch with life out in God's great garden. Their worlds is enlarged, Christianity becomes more real to them and ---to state it briefly---this particular activity in proportion to the time and money

expanded has been more fruitful in adding to and holding to the S.S. than any other single activity of the mission. It has called for much forbearance and many sacrifices in country homes but the effort is amply rewarded when one considers the results obtained" (page 41).

Topeka's connection to Mennonite missions in Chicago and the "Fresh Air Program" continued for over 60 years. Today there are people living in the area who were once "fresh air children". Armando Ponce, as a 3 year old child, started coming to this community in the 1950s. Years later he moved here to raise his family. Today he is a

member of the Emma Mennonite Church with children and grandchildren living in the area.

Marilyn Hartzler, a school teacher and sister to Cleo Hartzler, drove to Chicago every weekend for more than 15 years to work with inner city children at 18<sup>th</sup> Street Mennonite Chapel the successor to the 26th Street Mission. When "Miss Marilyn" died in 1968, a large contingent made the trip from Chicago for her funeral.

TAHS president Harold Gingerich, at age 18, started preaching in the streets of the city while at 18<sup>th</sup> Street working with Mennonite Voluntary Service in 1966.

## Track Talk

News & Notes



### Meeting Schedule:

- April 21st: TAHS Board Meeting
  - May 19th: TAHS monthly meeting
- The History of Law Enforcement in Topeka**

### Topeka Online:

Be sure to visit the Town of Topeka's website at: [www.topekain.net](http://www.topekain.net)

### Topeka H.S. Alumni Banquet

The Topeka High School Alumni Banquet will be held Saturday noon June 13th, 2009 at the Topeka Elementary School. Honored classes will 1929, 1939, 1949 and 1959.

### 35th Annual Topeka Quilt Show

The 35th Annual Topeka Quilt Show & Sale will be June 24th-27th at Eden Worship Center. Information is available online at [www.topekain.net](http://www.topekain.net) or [edenworshipcenter.com](http://edenworshipcenter.com)

### Wanted: Photos & Yearbooks

We are looking for old photos and/or post-cards. You can donate them to the historical society or simply let us copy them. We also need old Topeka and Westview High School yearbooks.

Answers: 1) 26th Street Mennonite Mission in Chicago; 2) July 15, 1911; 3) Marilyn Hartzler; 4) Sue Christner; 5) Genevieve Lehman; 6) 126 miles, 146 miles

### Topeka Area Historical Society

P.O. Box 33  
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### 2009 Board of Directors

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Susie Parker

Update:

## Roof Repairs Underway

Thanks to your generosity we are in a position to repair the roof on the Depot. The actual project should be completed in a matter of days and hopefully the new roof will serve us for many years to come.

While the cost of shingles has gone up a bit over the winter, we think that we will be pretty close to the cost estimate of around \$6,300.00.

Needless to say, the Depot is both an important historical site as well as the repository for irreplaceable artifacts. Very few communities are fortunate enough to have such a wonderful piece of their history. If you haven't stopped in for a while you need to take time and do that.

Your continuing financial support is greatly appreciated. For the first time the Board of Directors have established an annual budget of \$10,310 which includes the roof repair project. Checks should be made out to:

**Topeka Area Historical Society**

P.O. Box 33

Topeka, Indiana 46571



**"All Aboard!"**

**T.A.H.S. membership is only \$10.00 a year.**

*Membership Matters*

### TAHS Quiz

1. What group began sending "fresh air" children to Topeka?
2. When was the original depot destroyed by fire?
3. What Topeka resident went to Chicago every weekend to minister to inner city children?
4. Who started the Topeka Quilt Show?
5. Who was involved in both the Topeka Book Club and the Topeka Quilt Show?
6. In rail miles, how far is Topeka from Chicago? To Detroit?