

NONPROFIT SPOTLIGHT

WILLIAMSTON DEPOT MUSEUM

The Williamston Depot Museum is an all-volunteer organization committed to collecting, preserving and displaying historical records of Williamston. The museum provides educational opportunities through presentations, exhibits and tours. There are permanent exhibits that tell the story of Williamston from the earliest Native Americans to the latter part of the 20th century, and others that highlight Williamston's military history and depict Williamston "Then and Now." Special displays on such topics as Williamston's Fire Department, political elections, the Civil War, Williamston postcards, and numerous Christmas exhibits change periodically.

How the community benefits: The museum is a source of reference material for people interested in the history of the Williamston area or family history. Throughout the year, many people visit the museum. In addition to the casual visitor, teachers often bring classes to tour the museum. In May, the museum will host its annual Native American program and 150 third-grade students from area schools will participate. In the fall, the Williamston Depot Museum participates in the annual History Day Tour of local historical sites. Typically

125 Williamston High School students, as well as many others, visit three cemeteries, a restored one-room school and a chapel listed as a Registered Michigan Historic Site. The museum is also involved in community activities such as the Red Cedar Jubilee and December's Light Parade.

Some big news: Just completed is an exhibit titled "Williamston Makes Music," which covers many local musical events from the 1800s through the 20th century. A large poster declaring "Grand Celebration at Williamston, July 3, 1880" anchors one display, with others depicting Williamston High School bands through the years and events such as a Chautauqua, the Great Home Coming in 1914 and a Williamston Showboat on Red Cedar River in 1952 and 1953. Featured in one display is a large photo of the Williamston Girls Band, which was organized in 1910 and was directed by J. W. Loran-ger, who became known as Williamston's "Music Man." The trombone played by Ethyl Liverance, grandmother of museum board member David Jones, is a highlight of the exhibit. The exhibit opened May 3.

Making a difference: In 2014, we came across an old (Lansing) State Journal article from 1943

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» 369 W. Grand River, Williamston, MI 48895
» (517) 230-9030
» williamstonmuseum.org

with a headline that began, "Williamston family gives five sons to American's Armed Forces." That article gave us an idea. We knew two of the six Engardio sons were still living — Andrew, 92, residing in Adrian and Frank, 95, in San Diego, Calif. We contacted the two men and invited them to visit Williamston for the annual Red Cedar Jubilee. They agreed, were the grand marshals in the parade. After the parade, we hosted a reception at the museum in their honor. The Engardios had eight children and descendants of all seven of the children who married, were in attendance that day, some from distant locations. They learned daughter Mary had chronicled 25 years of not only the history of Williamston, but also of their family in seven very large scrapbooks that were donated to the museum upon her death. The family asked if they could return the following day to look at the scrapbooks. We opened the museum to them and what a gratifying experience it was to hear them reliving their days in Williamston through the many news

clippings, photographs and other memorabilia Mary had saved.

A powerful connection: The depot building that houses the museum is the third structure built to serve the railroad in Williamston. The first two fell to fire and the present building was built in 1893. It served Williamston for 70 years until improvements in alternative transportation (the paving of Grand River Avenue in 1923 and the opening of I-96 in 1962) ended its use. The Chesie Railroad considered the building's demolition in 1978, which sparked interest in its preservation. In 1978, two dozen concerned citizens met to discuss saving the depot. The building was moved to its present location at 369 West Grand River Avenue, but there was no money to do more. By 1986, the historical group was joined by area service organizations and dedicated volunteers who installed a new roof and new floors, and a rear addition was built. Rental of space to the Williamston Area Chamber of Commerce helped provide funds for restoration. Since that Monday in January 1893, when A.J.

"Andy" Edwards, station agent for the DL&N Railroad opened its doors for business, the little depot has witnessed the town's transformation from a small agricultural center to a thriving, progressive bedroom community. The process that turned a small depot into a well-regarded local history museum was driven by volunteers who had the foresight and understanding of its future value to the community, and continues to be led by new volunteers.

What you might not know: Unfortunately, we believe we are the "Best Kept Secret in Williamston." Perhaps the name Williamston Depot Museum is confusing. We are not a railroad museum. We are a historical museum, now located on what was once the Plank Road that connected Detroit with Lansing. During the annual History Day Tours, parents who accompany their children often comment that they've lived in Williamston for many years, but this is the first time they have been to the museum — sad, but true. Our challenge is to get folks into the museum for the first time. The building is owned by the city of Williamston, but a volunteer board of 12, two of whom have been on the board since its inception in 1987, is responsible for maintaining and oper-

ating the museum. We depend upon memberships, donations, grants and monies from fundraisers. We are grateful for volunteers who provide help with maintenance, act as docents and volunteer their help with the myriad of other tasks that are involved in operating a professional-looking museum. For 10 years, Val Berryman, curator of history at the Michigan State University Museum until his death, was on our board and taught us a great deal about how to design exhibits and maintain our collection. The last time he worked on an exhibit with us, he walked through the museum and his comment was, "For a town the size of Williamston, this is a fine museum. You should be proud." We are and we continually strive to live up to his standards.

How can I help: The public can become involved in the Williamston Depot Museum by joining the museum, volunteering to be a docent, assisting with data entry of donated items, creating exhibits, performing maintenance tasks, giving presentations, attending events, donating artifacts and of course, just visiting the museum.

Nonprofit Spotlight runs each Sunday in the Life section. Want to be featured? Visit www.lsj.com/nonprofit to fill out the form.