



Photos Christine Schwerin

A Thriving City that Knows and Appreciates its Past, Present & Future

By Cyndi Lieske

For more than 175 years, Howell has drawn visitors from near and far. First known as the county seat of a bustling agricultural community, Howell is a vibrant city of ten thousand people ideally situated between Ann Arbor, Detroit, Lansing and Flint. Its downtown district is listed in the National Register of Historic Places and it hosts an annual Harry Potter celebration each summer.



The Livingston County Courthouse is a Howell landmark. Its steeply pitched roof, four-sided clock tower and 1,200-pound bell have had a strong presence in the community for more than a century.

Roger L. Rosentreter

Settlers began arriving in the area in 1834 via the Grand River Trail. They discovered plentiful timber for homes; wild animals for food, rich soil and fresh water in the lakes, ponds and streams. Originally known as Livingston Center, the settlement became the governmental center for Livingston County. In 1835, pioneer Flavius J.B. Crane named the community after his friend, Thomas Howell, son of a New York judge. According to A. Riley Crittenden, in a *History of the Township and Village of Howell, Michigan* (1911), Crane's closest friends claimed he actually named the town for Howell's pretty sister.

Arriving in the area in 1835, Moses Thompson saw the lack of grist and lumber mills as a good business opportunity. He dammed up a small creek from which three smaller ponds and a swamp combined to make Thompson Lake, to power the mills. His efforts led to the creation of a town landmark and a favorite relaxation spot. Today, Howell City Park is on the west side of the lake. For years, residents have fished from the banks, gone swimming on warm summer evenings and made expeditions to the lake's small islands.

In 1860, Howell reported 757 residents. By 1900, the population had jumped to 2,218. In 1950, there were 4,553 residents. Today, almost ten thousand people call Howell home.

Ninety-one-year-old Elizabeth Rubbins Lawrenz recalls riding in a horse-drawn buggy with her mother and aunt, bringing butter and eggs to sell to downtown merchants in the 1920s. On Saturday nights, the family rode in their automobile to visit with friends and shop at the stores on Grand River.

According to Lawrenz, the McPherson family served as the backbone of the community. Scotsman William McPherson arrived in Howell in 1836 and opened up a blacksmith shop. McPherson's descendants helped fund the McPherson Memorial Hospital, founded in 1928. McPherson Oil Company, a petroleum products distribution business, established in the same year, is still located in downtown Howell.

With a nod to the McPherson family and the area's geographic similarities to the rolling hills of Scotland, in 1931 Howell High School students voted to name their school teams the Howell Highlanders. "The words suggest ruggedness, loyalty and courage: qualities highly desirable and necessary in teams representing Howell High School," the school newspaper explained. A bagpiper performs with the high school's marching band.

Howell's downtown area bordered by Clinton, Sibley, Chestnut and Barnard streets was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1987. Notable structures

include All Saints Episcopal Church (1880), First Presbyterian Church (1915) and the Ann Arbor Railroad Depot (1886). Three of the town's most striking historic structures include the county courthouse (1889), the opera house (1881) and the Carnegie library (1906).

With a 1,200-pound bell whose sound echoes for more than a mile, the Livingston County Courthouse has been a striking community symbol for more than a century. The clock tower, with clock faces on all four sides, can be seen for miles around. An expansive lawn with towering American elm trees has hosted family picnics, fairs, farmers' markets and all manner of political rallies through the years.

A lengthy renovation project at the courthouse began in 1975. Shortly after the restoration was complete, project architect Edward Francis noted, "Today the Livingston County Courthouse stands stately and proud—an architectural ornament adorning Howell's skyline. Gracing the historic central district of the town, the three-story brick structure with its steeply pitched slate roof and bell tower is a symbol of the continuity of the county's government and its people's cultural heritage. It also is visible testimony to a successful conservation project."

Elijah E. Meyers, designer of Michigan's Capitol Building in Lansing, was the architect for the Howell Carnegie

District Library. Andrew Carnegie donated \$10,000 for the library, contingent on residents donating the land. The four sons of William McPherson gave an entire block for the site and designated the rest for a city park. When work stalled, Carnegie gave \$5,000 more. That, coupled with money from the Howell Women's Club, completed the library. Local historian Crittenden noted in 1911, "It has certainly made as fine an appearing library building as there is in the state and being on the best thoroughfare, is generally noted and remarked about by all strangers in passing automobiles."

A block east of the library, or one block west of the courthouse, is the Howell Opera House, built in 1881. The Opera House hosted many community events and even birthday parties. In 1911, local newspapers told of a surprise birthday party for baseball great Ty Cobb there. Presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, actress Jessie Bonstelle and auto pioneer Henry Ford were among the celebrities that visited the Opera House. For many years after the building was closed in 1924, its lower level functioned as a hardware store and the once-elegant second floor venue became a storeroom. In 2000, the Livingston Arts Council purchased the building. Seven years ago, the restored first floor opened to host receptions, art



Scottish immigrant William McPherson arrived in Howell in 1836. The McPherson family and their home (at left, circa 1915) served as the backbone of the budding community of Howell. Although the businesses in downtown Howell (like these at the corner of Grand River Avenue and Michigan Avenue in 1902) have changed hands over the past century, the city continues to have a thriving downtown. Today, this corner is home to the Uptown Coffeehouse.



Andrew Carnegie donated \$15,000 to build the Howell Carnegie District Library, which opened in 1906. The McPherson family donated an entire city block for the site and designated the rest for a city park.

shows and small concerts. The building's complete restoration is planned for the future.

In the early 1880s, William K. Sexton imported the area's first Holstein cattle from Holland. In 1894, the Michigan Condensed Milk Factory opened west of the downtown area. Once up and running, the plant shipped condensed milk throughout Michigan and had many suppliers from area farms. No surprise that the Howell area was nicknamed "Michigan's Milk Bottle." By 1910, there were some 250 Holstein-Friesian cattle breeders in Livingston County.

According to the Bicentennial History, the first train stopped in Howell in 1871. On opening day, *The Detroit Post* reported, "The people are enthusiastic over the advent of the iron horse to their town and through the assemblage it clearly indicated the joy which they feel over the completion of the railroad for which they have worked and waited for so many long years." Passenger trains stopped serving Howell in 1951. However, city officials hope that a new passenger line between Washtenaw and Livingston counties lies in the future.

The invention of the automobile in the early twentieth century brought new industries to Howell. One

auto-related company was Citizens Auto Insurance. Founded in 1915 by William E. Robb, a Howell attorney and politician, Citizens Insurance was patterned after the mutual fire and windstorm insurance companies that were then popular in Michigan. Robb, who had sold windstorm insurance, was well known for his honesty and diligence. Citizens is still one of the area's largest employers.

The same year Citizens began, Howell started a business association paving the way for the Howell Area Chamber of Commerce in 1949. With more than 800 businesses as members, the chamber hosts the Annual Fantasy of Lights parade, the Michigan Challenge Balloon Festival and the Livingston County Home Show each year.

Duane Zemper, a town historian and long-time resident, traveled with a contingent from Howell to Washington, D.C., to deliver hundreds of Howell melons for President Dwight D. Eisenhower and other dignitaries to enjoy. With the trip, thought up by local melon farmer Dr. Pat May, the travelers garnered national publicity for the "Howell Honey Sweet."

The front page of the September 7, 1960, *Livingston County Press* proclaimed "Howell Celebrates its First Melon Festival." Inside was a full-page story with shots

of the Howell Melon Festival Queen, Patricia Downen, and Howell mayor Clifton Heller visiting landmarks in the capital. While they did not meet the president, the melon ambassadors received "the royal treatment," Heller told the *Press*. This included a private tour of the Oval Office and a meal in the Senate dining room.

One challenge for Howell has been the specter of Robert Miles, a former Grand Dragon of the Michigan Ku Klux Klan. A convicted felon, Miles lived on a fifty-eight-acre farm twelve miles north of Howell. The Miles' farm hosted many Klan gatherings that gave Howell a reputation as a hotbed of racial intolerance. Many residents wanted no part of the KKK. "They're smart fellas," Howell's Fred Catrell told a *Detroit Free Press* reporter in 1971. "We wish they hadn't come into this area. They can put on a pretty interesting talk, all right, but they're rebels. They're working against Americanism and our society." Community leaders rallied against the KKK in 1988 after a cross-burning on the lawn of an African American family in nearby Genoa Township. Roy Westran, president of Citizens Insurance, headed up the formation of a group called Livingston 2001. Now known as the Livingston Diversity Council,

the group works with educational programs and outreach to media continues.

Howell's leaders are still working to help assure the city's place as a progressive and welcoming community. Howell was awarded a \$100,000 grant and a "Cool Cities in Progress" designation from the state of Michigan in October 2006. The Cool Cities program sets up grassroots organizing among local business owners to help promote downtown activities for residents and cooperation among government entities.

In mid-May, several Howell area groups, along with Howell's nationally accredited Main Street program, will offer a Howell History Days to celebrate the town's past with an antique tractor display, a fashion show and tours of historic cemeteries and neighborhoods.

Howell's forebears would be pleased to know they can still draw a crowd. **mh**

Born in Walker, Michigan, **Cyndi Lieske** now lives in Howell. She thanks Duane Zemper, Joyce Fisher and Milton Charboneau of the Howell Area Archives, Howell Carnegie District Library staff members, Michael Craine of the Livingston County Road Commission and Elizabeth Rubbins Lawrenz for assistance with this story.



The McPherson Oil Company is now home to the Cobb-Hall Insurance Company.



Storefronts along East Grand River (circa 1888) depict the community's early growth. The largest building in the center is the National Hotel. The nearby train depot likely provided the hotel with many of its customers.



The Ann Arbor Railroad Depot was built in 1886, fifteen years after the first train stopped in Howell. Today, it serves Howell as a museum.