

# Newsletter of the MASON HISTORICAL SOCIETY



Mason, Ohio

and Alverta Green Museum

October 2021

## MASON'S OPERA HOUSE

Gina Burton Arens, Editor

Once a lively hub of Mason entertainment, education, and social activities, Sprinkle's Opera House, while still present has been silent for 85 years. It occupies the second floor of Mason's Fifth Third Bank building. Built by Samuel Sprinkle (1840-1907) in 1886, the Opera House hosted a wide variety of events.

Before Sprinkle built his opera house, William Dodds had purchased the property in 1874, known as Lot #6, from Drusilla R. Bates for \$1,800. She had purchased the property in 1869 for \$2,000. The existing building on the corner housed The Burch Hotel. After the Dodds purchase, The Burch Hotel moved out and it became known as Dodds Hall. The property had changed hands eleven times since William Mason sold it to James McCowen in 1816 for \$25.

Dodds Hall could be considered our first opera house as it hosted all sorts of entertainment for local residents. Dances, lectures, plays, and shows of all sorts were performed there. A steady stream of events continued until February 26, 1886, when fire broke out and burnt the building to the ground. Samuel Sprinkle quickly began negotiations

with E.C. and Adolphus Dodds<sup>2</sup> and purchased Lot #6, making plans to build his opera house.

"Opera houses were central to American life from the end of the Civil War through the 1920s. Most towns and cities, from small to large, had at least one opera house. Little, if any, opera was actually performed in these buildings. An opera house was simply a community entertainment and meeting hall."<sup>1</sup>

For fifty years, from 1886 to 1936, Sprinkle's Opera House flourished. Vaudeville entertainers, medicine shows, and string quartets often took the stage. It hosted high school and grade school graduations, school plays and operettas as well as Mason's annual alumni reunions. It was also used as a gym for basketball as the painted lines on the floor attest. Community events like dances, dinners and holiday parties were held there. News Year's Eve and New Year's Day parties were particularly popular. And the annual, two-day, "Farmer's Institute", an educational and entertainment event for farmers, met there for many years.



A band and crowd waiting to enter the Opera House on the street entrance doorway that was once located on the northeast corner of the building, ca. 1905.



A quarter got you two meals at Sprinkle's Opera House in 1891.

By 1924 the opera house was being referred to as the Mason Bank Hall. Banker, J.M Thompson, of The Mason Bank had bought the opera house from Sprinkle for \$12,500 in 1904. The Mason Bank Hall continued to draw many events during the final years of operation but

*story continues on next page*

The Mason Historical Society and Alverta Green Museum are located in the heart of downtown Mason, Ohio. Established over 40 years ago, the Society's aim is to create, promote and preserve the history and heritage of Mason.

**TO SUBSCRIBE TO OUR NEWSLETTER**

Join the Mason Historical Society at  
[Masonhistoricalsociety.org](http://Masonhistoricalsociety.org)  
or Call 513-398-6750

**New Museum Hours**

The Museum is now open Thursdays only from 2-8 pm. We hope the addition of evening hours will allow more opportunities for visits. Museum tours outside these hours will still be available by appointment.

## Mason's Opera House, cont.

in 1937 when Mason schools completed the high school gymnasium addition, all that changed. With the availability of a brand-new facility, Sprinkle's Opera House went dark and from that point never really recovered.

In 1979, Loretta Terry, president of the newly formed Mason Historical Society, made a fervent plea to the First Mason Bank to restore and save the old opera house. The bank considered the possibility of restoring the historic facility, but the current building regulations made it unfeasible.

Today, it sits deserted, a shell of what it once was. Currently used for bank storage, the space was previously considered for additional office space, but the renovation cost and accessibility issues have prohibited moving forward. Only a narrow wooden staircase leads up to the second floor while the wide winding staircase that once graced the northeast corner of the building has been filled in.

Sprinkle's Opera House has left its mark in Mason history. One can only imagine the murmur of the crowds, the music floating through the air and the laughter and gaiety that went along with such activity. High ceilings, old lighting fixtures, ornate wallpaper and a stage with a mountain mural painted directly onto the brick wall, are all vestiges of what once was and will never be again. The high school student names immortalized on the backstage walls represent a precious moment in time for those now long gone. The excitement it brought to the village was all part of the ambiance of a small midwestern town, like many out there, but then again none exactly the same.



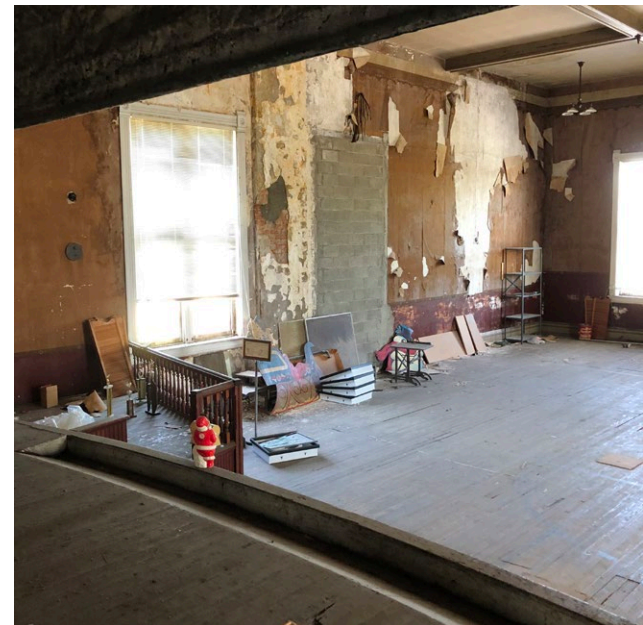
A hand-drawn, Autumn-themed banner graces the front of the stage.



This photo from 2016 shows the steps where several generations and many thousands of Masonites ascended into the Opera House. One of them was John McClung. His preliminary trial and Mayor's court were held here in the days following the 1901 murder of his wife Rebecca. The stairs are now filled in.



This stage backdrop mural of a mountain scene painted directly onto the brick is a tangible reminder of the Opera House's glory days.



View from the stage to the northwest corner of the 300-seat auditorium. The trough at the front of the stage was for candles to light up the performers. The orchestra pit is off to the left side.

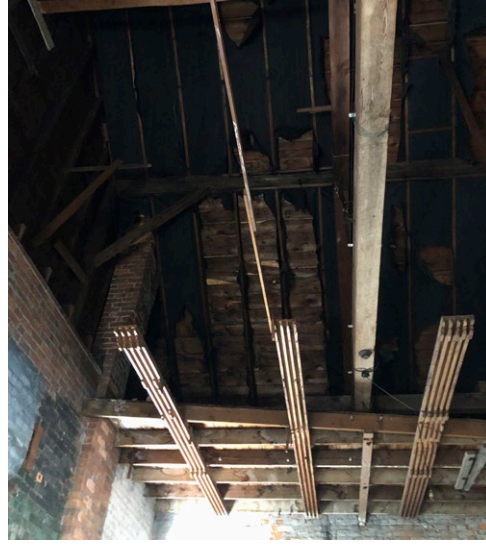


The door in the center of the photo (northeast corner) is where patrons would enter the house. Twin pot-bellied stoves on either side of the room would keep the crowd heated during winter months.

*more photos on next page*



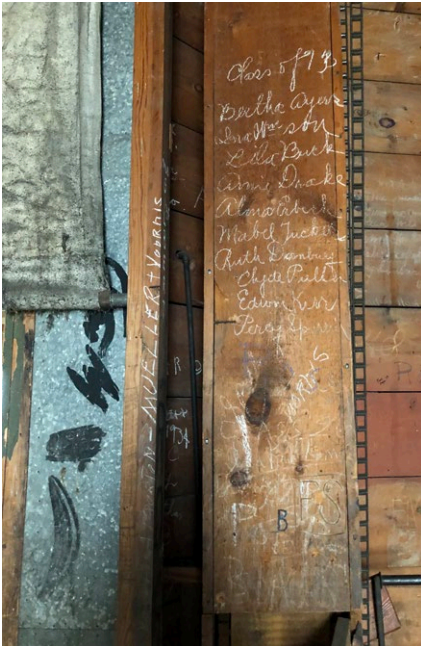
Painted lines on the floor boards date to when the auditorium was used for basketball practice.



Above the stage, ceilings are open to the roof. They could fly performers across the stage, if needed.



Some vestiges of wallpaper border still remain.



It was a rite of passage for graduating students to leave their mark on the backstage walls.

*left* Signatures from the Class of 1930: Bertha Ayer, Ina Williamson, Lila Buck, Amie Drake, Alma Erbeck, Mabel Tucker, Ruth Danbury, Clyde Pullen, Edwin Kerr, Percy Spurrier.

*right* Familiar names such as Melampy, Baysore, Erbeck, Spaeth, Dwire, Voorhis and Cox are abundantly represented backstage.



<sup>1</sup> William Faricy Condee, "Coal and Culture," 2005.  
<sup>2</sup> William Dodds, the father of E.C. & Adolphus died in 1884.  
*Around Mason, Ohio: A Story*, RM Springman, 1982.  
*Mason Pulse* Journal 2-18-1981.  
*Western Star* 5-30-79 / 10-5-83.  
 Contemporary photos by Sally Sherman Caudill.

## FLOYD AND HIS "BOYS"

As a follow-up to our August Mason Baseball story, a recent reunion of the Mason Athletic Hall of Fame brought Floyd Richards back in touch with his "boys" who are now in their early sixties.

L-R: Mark Sowders, John Sowders, Greg Richards, Floyd Richards, Dave Smith, Jay Jones, Steve Burton.



## TIME TO ORDER COMMEMORATIVE BRICKS

Orders for commemorative bricks to honor an individual, family or organization are only placed a few times a year so now is the time to order! Placed in the front walkway of the Alverta Green Museum, commemorative bricks make a nice tribute gift and help to support the Mason Historical Society.

Please call or email the museum with any questions. Bricks may be purchased by returning the enclosed order form with payment.



# A TOWERING DISASTER

## Okey Bevins' WLW Crash

Sally Sherman Caudill, Editor

When the WLW radio tower was erected in 1933, it was the pride of Mason. Just two years after it was built, though, the tower would be the instrument of death for a young aviator.

Okey Bevins was a well-known local airmail pilot, who flew out of Lunken. By 1935, he had moved to Wilson, North Carolina and was working as a flight instructor. The 36-year-old who had 16 years of flying experience, had once attempted a non-stop transcontinental solo flight in 1929. He started out from Los Angeles, but only made it as far as Willard, New Mexico.

In addition to flight instruction, Okey was working as a salesman for the Aeronca Company based at Lunken. He flew back to his home airfield on business and intended to fly to Detroit the next day. On the morning of October 18, 1935, he took off from Lunken in his Aeronca plane and headed north.



Charlie Pyles, Cincinnati Aviation Heritage Society

Okey Bevins and his wife, Martha, wait while their plane is fueled at Lunken. In 1930, Martha was the first woman in Cincinnati to receive her transport pilot's license. Okey had been her instructor and they married in 1928. They spent part of their honeymoon flying their plane around advertising *True Story Magazine*.<sup>2</sup> Undated photo.

That morning, the fog was so dense over Mason that Okey's plane "came straight for the tower and at the last second swerved to the left and up"<sup>1</sup> as the tower came into view. Investigators later speculated that the plane may have brushed against one of the supporting guy wires around the tower.

At 10:21 am, Bevins' plane struck the 831-foot tower at a height of 600 feet. With its right wing ripped from

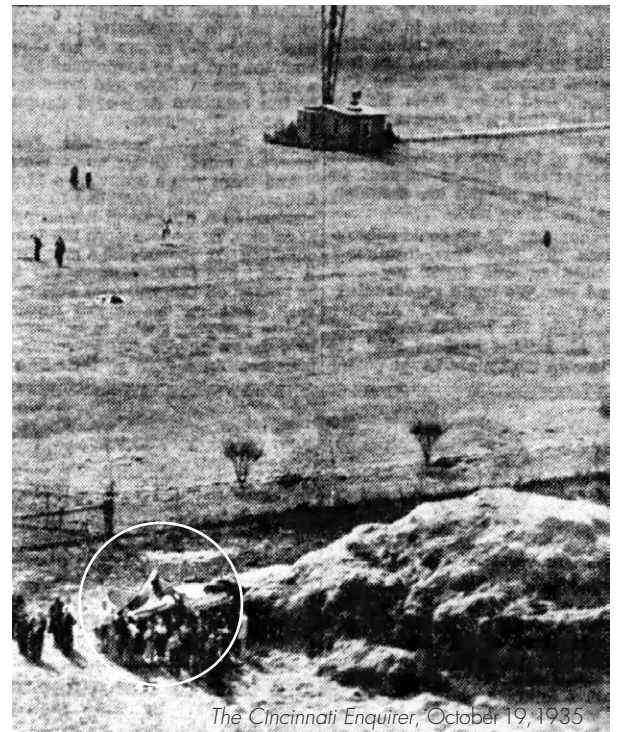


Hans Dam Collection, Wright State University

Spectators were drawn to the scene of the crash.

the fuselage, it fell into a haystack 400 feet away on Ivar Gerard's farm. Howard Wiggins, a farmhand for Gerard, had been raking leaves when he saw the plane come down. When Wiggins inspected the demolished plane, it was clear to him from the sight of the aviator's mangled body jammed in the cockpit, that there was no sign of life.

*The Cincinnati Enquirer* reported that the tower's "numerous red warning lights and a revolving red beacon light were lighted and in operation at the time."<sup>1</sup> The tower was not damaged and continued to broadcast.



*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 19, 1935

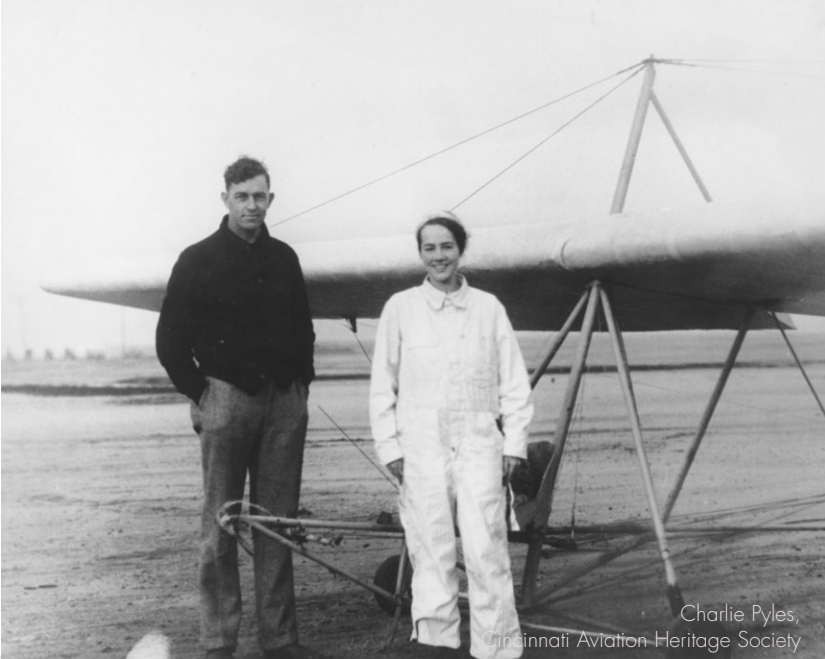
Bevins and his wrecked plane crashed into a haystack on the Gerard farm just 400 feet from the base of the tower (top).

Okey Bevins' logbook, which was found in the wreckage, showed that he had 6,768 flying hours. His friends and fellow pilots knew him as a careful flyer, but sadly, Mother Nature sealed his fate. In the 86 years since this crash, there has fortunately been no other aircraft or otherwise deadly incidents with the WLW tower.

*additional photo next page*

<sup>1</sup>*The Cincinnati Enquirer*, October 19, 1935

<sup>2</sup>*Lunken Airfield*, Arcadia Publishing, Stephen Johnson and Cheryl Bauer



Charlie Pyles, Cincinnati Aviation Heritage Society

Okey Bevins with Anne Morrow Lindbergh at Lunken Field when he was helping teach her to fly gliders, ca. 1930. The wife of famed aviator, Charles Lindbergh, Anne became the 10th American and the first woman to receive a first-class glider pilot license.

## Mural Unveiling and Wine Tasting

The MHS mural unveiling along with a wine tasting was held at the Alverta Green Museum on Fri. night, Sept. 17th. The mural showcases a colorful view of Mason's history and is on the west wall of the Museum addition. It was designed by Sally Sherman Caudill and painted by Herb Nally.

The wine tasting, organized by Gina Burton Arens, was delicious! It paired tasty casual foods with a complementary array of wines; one with a historical connection to the area. High spirits were definitely the order for the evening; everyone had a "vine" time!



Mural unveiling and wine tasting



# RECAP OF SEPTEMBER EVENTS

## B-50 Bomber Program Resounding Success

If you were not present for the recent MHS program, "Fatal Flight & the Nuclear Scare in Mason," you missed one of the most outstanding programs ever offered by the historical society. With over 130 attendees, Sally Sherman Caudill, unfolded a



Sally Sherman Caudill gives an in-depth look into the crash.

fascinating, detailed account of the plane's mission, it's ultimate demise and the unanswered questions surrounding the crash including theories on why the plane went down.

Adding another layer of emotional impact that evening, was the fact that family members of the plane's captain and navigator travelled from out of state to attend the program.

They were deeply grateful for the experience and for the way in which Sally honored the memory of their father/grandfather.

Our sincere appreciation goes out to Sally for the months of intensive research she dedicated to the program and for Jeff Hill Video for recording the program that evening. Copies of the program video are available for \$5 at the Alverta Green Museum for members who were unable to attend.

Commissioner of Warren County Veterans Services, John Looker, presents an engraved plaque of recognition to Walt Anderson of Nebraska. Walt, whose father was the navigator on the doomed flight, was one of three families in attendance.



left The audience filled the room to capacity.

# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

If you have any thoughts you would like to share regarding Mason history, please email them to [mason.oh.historical@gmail.com](mailto:mason.oh.historical@gmail.com)

We heard from several of our readers in the last couple of months. We love your stories, so keep them coming...

**Bill Federle** - "I enjoyed the August newsletter about Mason Baseball and the 1967 Bob's Carpet team. It brought back memories of playing baseball as a young kid growing up in Mason. Playing ball in various backyards in the neighborhood, and later I played in the "cap" league at Civitan (now Heritage Oak). The cap league consisted of no uniforms or team shirts, simply the same-colored ball cap for each player. Team names were simple too. You either played for the red caps, blue caps, black caps, etc.

"A few years prior to the 1967 team highlighted in the newsletter, I played for the 1965 Bob's Carpet team. I thought I had made the big times graduating from a simple ball cap to a full uniform. We had a great head coach in "Smokey" Anderson who taught us the fundamentals of baseball and the importance of giving it our best every day. While we did not have the success that the 1967 team had, we had a good team and won a vast majority of our games.

"I write to bring attention to Mr. Bob Williams, our team sponsor. For many years Mr. Williams owned and operated Bob's Carpet, a flooring business in Mason. During all those years he was an avid supporter of Mason sports programs.

"But what I remember best was after our 1965 baseball season we had a small gathering to celebrate a solid season. Despite our many wins, Mr. Williams was not satisfied that our team had not earned any league awards. As a result, he personally purchased baseball trophies for each and every player. That small trophy was my first trophy and over the years became my most valued trophy.

"Thanks for the baseball memories your August newsletter generated."

Herschel Jayne's Class B Knothole Team, ca. 1958

*front L-R:* Guy Popplewell, Mike Booth, Glenn Lane, Charlie Hamilton, Dick Fussner.

*2nd Row:* Bob Clingner, John McCurley, Tim Lichtenberg, George Bartlett, David Jayne.

*3rd Row:* Bruce Walker, Richard Fox, David Williams, John Berry, Jim Land.



**Janet Muennich Honerlaw** stopped in to tell us how much she enjoyed the August newsletter article on "Music In Mason." She was thrilled to see that we included the Community Band photo with her father, drummer Joseph Muennich.

Janet also told us about the "Legion Dances" that took place during the 1960s in the old Municipal building (now Two Cities Pizza). They were sponsored by the American Legion and were held periodically. Janet and husband, Ted, would make sure to secure a babysitter in advance. She recalls, "we looked so forward to those nights; we just loved those dances. They were so much fun." The place would be packed with couples dancing the night away. Just one more example of how music has enriched the history of this city.

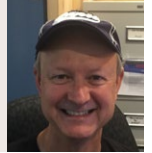
**Susan Jayne Case** shared a story in a recent letter to the editor she wrote that was published in a 2011 newsletter. She recounted her years growing up in Mason. My favorite part was her first line (that I have heard from many) "Thinking back over all the years of my childhood, I cannot imagine a better place to grow up than Mason, Ohio."

She spoke about her father coaching the first knothole "Class B" team sometime in the late fifties. This would have preceded the first "Class D" team in Mason in 1963. I was unaware of this team until Susan brought it to my attention. According to current standards the difference in "Class" designations is age. Class B would have been ages 12 to 13 whereas Class D would indicate ages 8 to 9. The Class designations also have specific pitching and base distances as well as what number of innings constitutes a valid game.

Susan's Dad, Herschel Jayne organized and coached the first "Class B" knothole team and possibly the first knothole team in Mason. Thanks to Susan Case for setting the record straight and for her father's contribution to childhood sports in Mason. I am sure many young boys' lives were enriched by the experience.

# The Board Report

Jay Meibers, President



October has always been my favorite month of the year. The leaves start to show off their brilliant colors, the days are comfortable, and the nights have a chill in the air. I married Cindy 35 years ago in this special month. My birthday is also in October but not looking forward to turning sixty this year! Where does the time go? I remember as a child shucking corn in October until my hands had blisters in preparation to Tic-Tack houses. The corn was generously provided by Don Eberhard's corn field that was behind St. Susanna at the time. Thanks Don!

September was a crazy busy month for the Historical Society. The City of Mason submitted a resolution making September Mason History Awareness month and I had a chance to speak at the Mason City Council Meeting on Sept. 13. A big thanks goes to Gina Arens who approached the city months ago about the idea of a resolution.

The 1950 Fatal Flight Program was held Sept. 15 at Mason Elementary School to allow for more attendance. To say that this program was outstanding would be an understatement. Sally Sherman Caudill did an incredible job with her investigative work, artifacts display, presentation materials, speakers and coordinating having family members there of two of the airmen who perished in the crash. John Looker, commissioner of Warren County Veteran's Services, ended the program with a touching speech and presented recognition plaques to those family members.

It was a very emotional moment. Jeff Hill was kind enough to film the entire program and provide us DVD copies.

On Sept. 17 we unveiled the new mural in the museum addition. Sally Sherman Caudill's design and Herb Nally's artistry on the mural are a sight to behold. Gina Arens organized the night with food and drink pairings enjoyed by all. Sally also spoke during the evening about her design concept of the mural. Visit the museum so you can enjoy the mural & bring friends!

Thank you to all members who have returned their Reach-Out Raffle tickets as well as some donations made above & beyond the ticket purchases. There is still plenty of time to get your tickets turned in since the drawing will be done on Nov. 16 at our annual business meeting and elections. Speaking of elections, we do have some Board positions open including Social Media & Historian positions. Please give us a call if you are interested or have questions.

Lastly, we are including with your newsletter a brick ordering form. We must get a minimum order of 5 bricks to place an order. A brick is a great way to remember family and friends and support the Historical Society at the same time.

Enjoy the Fall weather & stay well!

---

## THIS MONTH IN MASON HISTORY

Excerpt from *Around Mason, Ohio: A Story*, Rose Marie Springman except where noted.

**1858:** Two travelling shows entertained the villagers during the year. "The Man with No Legs Show" in June and a circus was set up on October 21.

**1868:** In February the town council decided that those swine with wire rings in their noses, that could not root up gardens and yards, would not be impounded. But by October town council enacted a new ordinance prohibiting swine from running at large around town.

**1883:** The engineer on the construction train, Olly Gould was killed at Hageman's Station gravel bank when the road gave away and the engine was upset on October 29.

**1925:** One of the topics of The Mother's Club October meeting was about how to get the local women to register to vote in November. (Women had been granted the right to vote on August 18, 1920.)

**1929:** On October 21 there was a merger of the Mason Bank and the First National Bank. The new officers were W. E. Scott, president; L. Earl Thompson, vice president; D. E. Heywood, cashier; and W. E. Chesney, assistant cashier. The new name for the business was the First Mason Bank.

**1938:** The 1200' long viaduct bridge over the Little Miami River at Fosters was dedicated in October. The little village would be by-passed by highway traffic from this point on. Indicative of Foster's status was the fact that no one from the village was asked to take part in the opening ceremonies by state officials. The new bridge, which had taken two years to build, cost \$600,000 and was financed as a federal aid project.

**1954:** Ninety eight percent of the property owners in Mason Heights, the subdivision built by Clair Smith, signed a petition asking for annexation to Mason in October but no action was taken by the council. In early 1955 Smith was given permission to extend water lines to the 64 houses in the Heights, but annexation would not occur until he paved the streets and installed storm sewers, curbs and gutters.

# BUSINESS MEMBERS *and* PARTNERS

## LIFETIME MEMBERS

Air Authority Heating and Air Conditioning  
Al's Heating and Cooling  
American Legion, Post 194  
American Legion Auxiliary Unit 194  
Brunk Excavating, Inc.  
Chris Champ – State Farm agent  
Jeff Hill Video  
Mitsubishi Electric Automotive  
People's First Savings Bank  
R.E. Middleton Construction LLC  
Senour-Flaherty Insurance  
Shorten and Ryan Funeral Home  
Voorhis, Slone, Welsh and Crossland, Architects  
Walldogs – Mason Sign Company  
Yost Pharmacy, Inc.

## BUSINESS MEMBERS

Artis Senior Living of Mason  
Heritage Awards  
Lt. Robt. N. Mount V.F.W.  
9622 Aux.  
Mason Bowl, Inc.  
Mason Health Care Center  
Minuteman Press of Lebanon  
Mueller Funeral Home  
Terry's Lawn Care, Inc.  
Warren County Historical Society  
16 Lots Brewing Co.

## PARTNERS

City of Mason  
Culver's – Mason  
LaRosa's – Mason  
Mason City Schools  
Mason Community Grange  
No.1680  
Mason-Deerfield Chamber  
Mason Public Library

## WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

**Please join us in welcoming  
the following new members to  
the Mason Historical Society**

Carrie Ayer  
Rick Ball  
Juli Doubet  
Kathy Evers  
Jill Kleinman  
Delmar Mahlerwein  
Karen & Kevin Malloy  
Carol Rauf  
Todd Stephenson  
Ed Strosnider  
Sam Wernsman  
Richard & Molly Wolford  
Jane Young