



HISTORICO

Sangamon County Historical Society Newsletter

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March 2021

A Special Message: Keeping You, But Not History, at a Distance

Until the crisis is passed and we can resume a normal meeting schedule, the Society will continue to post video programs online and feature them in *Historico*. *Historico* is also posted online at sangamonhistory.org if you wish to view it digitally.

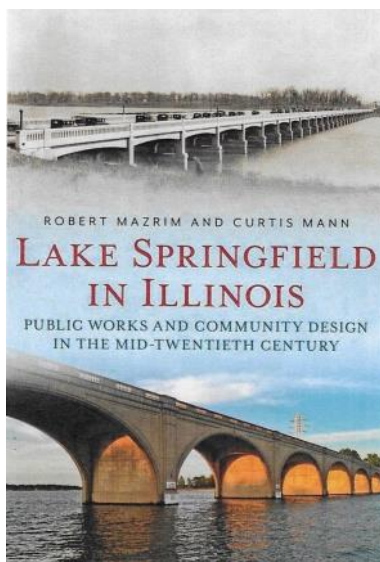
March Program Features Discussion about the New Lake Springfield Book

By Curtis Mann

A new book about the history of Lake Springfield was the topic for the Society's March video program. Authors Robert Mazrim and Curtis Mann discussed various details about their pictorial work titled *Lake Springfield in Illinois: Public Works and Community Design in the Mid-Twentieth Century*.

A popular exhibition about the lake curated by Mazrim at the Springfield Art Association was the inspiration for the book. The response to the show was a factor in Mazrim and Mann's decision to write the book. The lake has not been written about before and they thought it would be a worthwhile subject. The pictorial history for-

mat was chosen because of Mann's experience with prior projects and the large collection of Lake Spring-



field photographs archived at the Sangamon Valley Collection at Lincoln Library. Photographs provided by Mazrim and contemporary photographs comprise the balance of the book.

The book is divided into eight chapters that focus on various aspects about its history including the need for a reliable water source, what the area was like before the construction of lake, and the construction itself. Construction of a dam across Sugar Creek began in the spring of 1933. The lake reached full pool in May 1935 and was dedicated with a three-day ceremony over the weekend of July 12, 1935. **Continued page 2**

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As another Spring begins and we find ourselves with a few more warm and sunny days, I find myself in a very thankful mood. I would like to thank Curtis Mann and Robert Mazrim for their discussion with me for our March video program. It was a pleasure to talk about their great new book, *Lake Springfield in Illinois*. I have to doubly thank Curtis for also contributing a summary of the presentation for this month's *Historico*. I would also like to thank board member Cinda Klickna and SangamonLink editor Mike Kienzler for their excellent contributions to the *Historico* this month. And finally, perhaps most of all, I must thank all the members who have donated to our fundraiser for the special projects grants. There is still

time to donate. Do you of a group that could benefit from a grant? The deadline for applications is April 30.

Our vice president, Susan Helm, is featured in the current issue of *Regeneration* from the *Illinois Times*. It highlights her activities in the community and contributions to Springfield. We are fortunate to have her on our board.

I'm looking forward to our program on Virginia Eifert in April in partnership with Sangamon County Big Read.

Stephanie J Martin

Lake Springfield

Continued from page 1

Later chapters focus on the power and water purification plants, recreational facilities, clubs, and life on the lake. The lake has over 735 residential lots surrounding it.

Nearly two dozen private clubs were established along the shores of the lake. In some cases the clubs were fraternal or occupational such as the Knights of Columbus or the Press Club. Others like the Ski Club and Rod and Reel Club were focused on water-themed activities.

Mazrim and Mann discussed the history of the lake through a series of photographs. Highlights of this part of the program included the importance of the Lindsay Bridge, the lakeside power plant, water purification plant and Lincoln Memorial Garden and Nature Center. A

bonus feature of the program was original footage of the clearing of the land in preparation for the lake.

At the end of the program, Mazrim and Mann described some of the issues they had in writing this book. Chiefly, the authors noted the difficulty in finding photographs to help represent the narrative they were writing. With some topics they had an abundant amount of photographs to choose from while struggling with other topics to find a single photograph.

The book is available online through Arcadia Publishing, Amazon and other large retailers. Copies can also be purchased at local bookstores. The program is available for viewing on the Society's YouTube channel which can be accessed by going through the So-

ciety's webpage or by going directly to YouTube.



Historico, published 10 times a year (except July & December), is the official bulletin for members of the Sangamon County Historical Society. *Winner, Certificate of Excellence, Illinois State Historical Society.*

You can download back issues of **Historico** in PDF format by going to our website, www.sangamonhistory.org or sanchohis.org. Send event announcements to SCHSoffice@gmail.com.

Stephanie Martin, *Historico* Editor

April Program Will Feature Virginia Eifert

The Society's video program released on April 20 will be "Virginia Eifert: Springfield Native, Prolific Naturalist." Learn about the life and legacy of Virginia Eifert (1911-1966) from researcher John Hallwas, her son Larry Eifert, and Illinois State Museum staff. Virginia Eifert was a naturalist, author, and artist from Springfield. She worked at the Illinois State Museum where she started, wrote for, and edited *The Living Museum* magazine and wrote publications on flowers, birds, animals, rivers, people, and history. Along with biographical information, the presenters will highlight collections related to

Eifert at Western Illinois University, www.virginiaeifert.com, and the Illinois State Museum. The Society is excited to be a partner in the Academy of Lifelong Learning's Big Read Sangamon County. The Big Read is a National Endowment of the Arts program in which a community reads the same book and hosts events around it. The book for the local Big Read is *Lab Girl* by Hope Jahren. For information about the programs and how to get a book: <https://www.ilcc.edu/community-education/academy-lifelong-learning/nea-big-read-sangamon-county/>



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SCHS is Taking Grant Applications and Donations

The Society is excited to announce it is now taking applications for its annual special projects grant program. Since 2013, the Society has provided funds to museums, cemeteries, history organizations, and other groups for projects that have produced markers and signs, exhibits, and programs. The deadline for applications is April 30, 2021. Grantees will be announced in the summer.

For more information: https://www.sancohis.org/schs_grant_program.htm
 Trivia night has funded the special projects grants. Unfortunately, in 2020 and 2021, the Society has not been able to hold the trivia night. Members received letters asking for a donation to support the grants in lieu of the trivia fundraiser. The Society hopes you consider supporting this important work.

Sangamon Experience Debuts Hometown Pride Digital Exhibit

For the County's bicentennial year the Sangamon Experience has developed a new digital exhibit, Hometown Pride. It will have 200 items, four representing each town in Sangamon County. It is a collaboration between the Sangamon Experience, the Sangamon Valley Collection at Lincoln Library and libraries, organizations, and individu-

als contributing to represent their communities. It will include oral histories, photos, and original research.

For more information see their website: uis.edu/sangamonexperience
 Also check out their weekly series in March "Community Trailblazers: The Women of Sangamon County" on Facebook.

Please make note of our official mailing address:

SCHS
Box 9744
Springfield, Illinois,
62791-9744

Bell Miller—Florist

By Cinda Klickna

As citizens participate in the city-wide reading of Hope Jahren's *Lab Girl*, a memoir called "a treatise on plant life," it is fitting to remember a Springfield woman who loved flowers. She was Bell Miller who operated a large floral business and built an apartment building, now home to the Inn at 835 on Second Street.

In 1892, at the age of 22, Miller started her small business at 829 S. Second. One greenhouse soon grew to seven, covering the area of First and Canedy Streets. The *Illinois State Register* - Nov. 22, 1894 - described the business: four greenhouses were devoted to growing up to twenty varieties of carnations, Miller's specialty, two grew other cut flowers and one grew palms and ferns. There was a private office, sales room, sleeping room for an assistant, packing room and potting room, all furnished in hard wood with electric lighting. The article describes a "hardwood ice box that can hold 3000 flowers" and commends Miller for her "thorough mastery of every detail of the work and an earnest desire to please her patrons."

Floral arrangements were delivered throughout the city. As an active member of First Presbyterian Church, she contributed altar flowers for each Sunday's service for 30 years. She often judged flower shows, including for the Springfield Art Association.

Miller's father came to Springfield prior to the Civil War and built a home on land near a trail that would later become Second Street. Bell recounted stories told by her parents that Indians often walked along that trail. Her father entered into a partnership for a hardware store but discovered the business was in debt. It is believed he was the first person in the county to file bankruptcy; he later earned the reputation of paying any debt he incurred.

In addition to her business, Bell Miller ran a luxury apartment building which she had constructed in 1909, at 835 S. Second at the cost of \$30,000. Designed by Springfield architect George Helme, it had six flats with oak woodwork and mantels and wainscot paneling in the dining room and offered steam heat, telephone service, gas/electrical lighting, and

indoor plumbing. Ads in the paper read: "To Lease: High-class, 6 rooms, janitor service, most desirable neighborhood in the city." This building is now the Inn at 835.

By 1913, Miller had opened new headquarters at First and Canedy. She advertised, "You'll find a splendid variety of the choicest cut flowers and blooming plants. Full line of fancy baskets. Delivery to all parts of Springfield." In 1929, she sold the business to Joseph Frisch, a florist in town.

Miller sold the apartment building in 1937, but it continued to operate until 1994 when it was purchased by Court and Karen Conn. It was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1995 and in 1997 opened as an inn. Karen Conn says, "We found brick-lined tunnels during our restoration work. We believe these were where the boilers were located that helped keep the greenhouses hot."

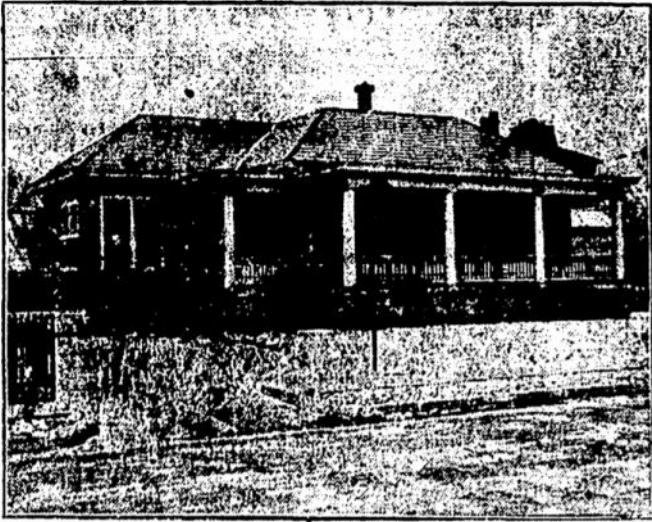
Miller spent the last eight months of her life in St. John's Hospital, where she died on Jan. 30, 1940 at the age of 69.

Bell Miller

*Wholesale and
Retail Florist*

First and Canedy Sts.

We are now in our new quarters and office—better than ever equipped to attend to your orders promptly.



AT

Bell Miller's

First and Canedy Sts.

You'll find a splendid variety of the choicest cut flowers and blooming plants. Many appropriate suggestions for Easter.

Full Line of Fancy Baskets
Deliveries to All Parts of Springfield

Both Phones 227

Illinois State Journal, March 19, 1913

SangamonLink Update

By Mike Kienzler
SangamonLink Editor

People want to know more about Sangamon County history, and SangamonLink, the online encyclopedia of the Sangamon County Historical Society, now has the numbers to prove it.

SangamonLink published its first half-dozen entries on March 17, 2013. Among those earliest topics were the creation of the town of Springfield and the tragic story of the Donner Party. The 1,300th entry (reporting on an 1887 roof collapse at the fabled Chatterton Opera House) went live on March 20, 2021, almost exactly eight years later.

The SCHS leaders who came up with the idea for SangamonLink, including the late Nancy Chapin, were sure there was a market for local history. In March 2019, SangamonLink gained the ability to accurately track readership, and the results demonstrate those leaders were right.

Between March 2019 and March 2021, SangamonLink entries were viewed 306,000 times by more than 143,000 readers (on average, readers check out two-plus entries per visit). And readership is growing – from an average of just under 11,000 views monthly during SangamonLink’s first year of accurate counts to more than 14,300 per month in Year 2.

That increase continues. February 2021, the most recent month for which SangamonLink has full numbers, was the first month during which the site recorded 16,000

views.

While new entries tend to get the most views, some older entries are evergreens, drawing readers in month after month. Among those favorites are histories of former local businesses, like Sangamo Electric and Franklin Life, coal mining, and local crimes and criminals.

People also are perennially interested in the death of Fido, Abraham Lincoln’s dog.



Franklin Life Building, Springfield



Fido, Lincoln’s Dog

You have lots of ways to keep track of what SangamonLink is doing. New entries (and sometimes old ones, when there’s a news hook) are always linked on Sanga-

monLink’s Facebook page, on the Sangamon County Historical Society’s Facebook page and on the Facebook page labeled “Memories of Springfield, Illinois, and Surrounding Areas.” SangamonLink also has its own Twitter page. Or you can sign up to be notified by email whenever a new entry is posted; just scroll down to the bottom of any SangamonLink page and click on the checkbox.

SangamonLink is readable on any device that can access the Internet. It’s always free to read, and there are no copyright restrictions on use of its original content (as long as users remember to credit SangamonLink).

Since you’re reading this newsletter, you’re probably a member of the Sangamon County Historical Society, and you should pat yourself on the back as well. SangamonLink would not be possible without the financial, technical and moral support of the SCHS.



Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church
Springfield

New Members

Charles Stroub, Elaine Moran, and Kurt Kremitzki

Moonlight Garden (Excerpt from Sangamon Link)

Moonlight Garden flourished as an open-air dance pavilion and then an indoor roller rink on Wabash Avenue for more than 35 years.

Entrepreneur/showman Roy Dexheimer Sr. founded Moonlight Garden as the otherwise nameless “Open Air Dance Pavilion” in June 1927. He adopted the “Moonlight Garden” name sometime later that year, although, over the years, patrons, newspapers and at times Dexheimer himself (in ads) often added an “S” to the name. Whether known as Moonlight Garden or Moonlight Gardens, and whether a dance spot or a roller rink, the venue at Chatham Road and Wabash Avenue was a top Springfield entertainment attraction until it closed in 1964.

In the early years, Dexheimer booked top dance bands whenever he could. Bandleader Guy Lombardo reportedly said later Moonlight Garden was one of his favorite places to play. Peaches Browning, “the world’s most publicized girl” (she created a tabloid scandal when, at age 15, she married, then quickly separated from, 51-year-old Edward “Daddy” Browning), appeared at Moonlight Garden in 1931. Bands from St. Louis and Chicago were regular visitors.

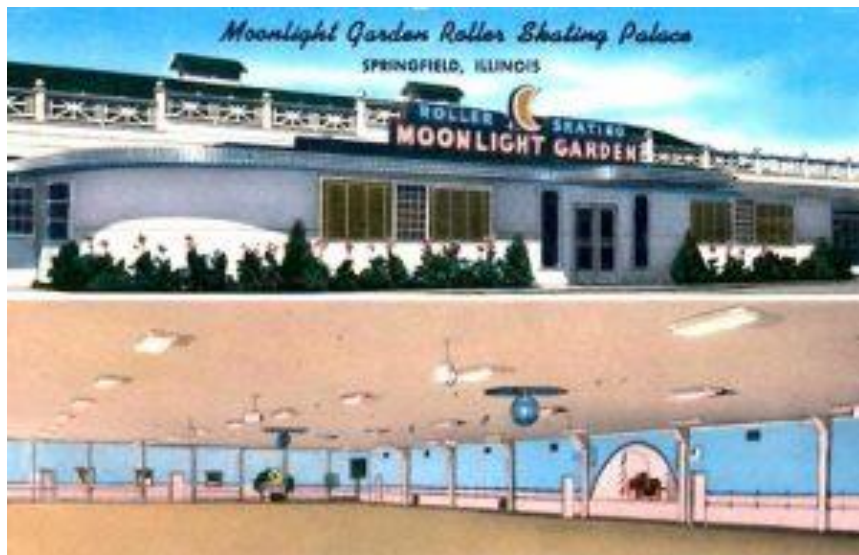
At first, Dexheimer employed what he called the “park plan” for ticket pricing: each dance cost a couple 10 cents. He changed that approach in 1932, charging women 15 cents and men 25 cents for admission and unlimited dancing before 9 p.m. After 9 p.m., the price went up to 25 cents for “ladies” and 40 cents for men. However, since Moonlight Garden was on what was then the far outskirts of Springfield – 3½ miles from downtown – Dexheimer provided free bus service to and from Sixth and Adams streets to the pavilion.

But dancing wasn’t all you could find at the Garden. Dexheimer also sponsored marathon walking competitions, rodeos, “motorcycle polo” contests and anything else that would draw patrons and revenue. (There was also a Sinclair service station on the property, a holdover from Dexheimer’s earlier career in the gas and oil business.)

And there apparently were other draws too. When an explosion and fire destroyed Moonlight Garden on Dec. 20, 1935, Dexheimer told the *Illinois State Journal* he believed unnamed local gamblers started the blaze.

If the blaze was arson, no one was ever arrested, and Dexheimer quickly rebuilt a more lavish version of Moonlight Garden – 10,000 square feet in all, half of it devoted solely to dancing, plus a cocktail room and two lounges. Dancing went on from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m. nightly to the sounds of Jack Staulcup and His Famous Orchestra (“favorites of the midwest’s leading hotels and Big Ten college proms”).

The heyday of dancing into the wee hours apparently had passed, however, and Dexheimer converted the Garden to a roller rink in 1938. Once again, he went into it in a big way. In addition to recreational skating, The Moonlight Garden Roller Skating Palace, to give the rink its full name, offered skating lessons (beginners were admitted free on Sunday afternoons) from in-house skate pros, along with theme nights, skating competitions and exhibitions by roller-skating champions. **Continued on page 7**



Postcard

Upcoming Events

April 6 The Springfield and Central Illinois African American History Museum presents “Camp Butler National Cemetery Then and Now.” See their website to register. Zoom. 7pm.

April 7 Dr. Devin Hunter, UIS Assistant Professor of History, will present on *Changing Landscapes* and provide a preview of the 2021 Illinois History Symposium. For more information see UIS Lunch & Learn. Zoom. Noon.

April 12 Lincoln Library presents “Behind the Book with Melinda McDonald.” She will be discussing her new book, *Dot's War*, a novel set in the 1940s about a woman who works at the Sangamon Ordnance Plant. Zoom. 6:30pm.

April 17 The Friends of Lincoln Library presents “Route 66 in Illinois” with Joe Sonderman & Cheryl Eichar Jett. Zoom. 7pm.

April 20 Dana Thomas House Foundation presents *Restored Wright: Restoration of the Dana-Thomas House*. Registration and fee required. Zoom. 7pm.



Now Open

The **Springfield and Central Illinois African American History Museum** reopened on March 4th with new hours: Thursday-Saturdays from Noon to 4 p.m.

The **Sangamon Valley Collection at Lincoln Library**, 326 S. 7th St. is open for research Mon-Sat 10am-5pm Call (217) 753-4900 ext. 5634 for an appointment.

Fashioning Illinois: 1820-1900, exhibit, is open now through May 2021 at the **Illinois State Museum**, Springfield. Tuesday-Saturday 10-4

Opening Soon

Elijah Iles House will open for the season on April 24th. 628 S. 7th St.

Continued from page 6

Skating on the Garden's 80- by 180-foot floor remained popular through the '40s and '50s and into the 1960s. In 1960, an *Illinois State Journal* photo spread called Moonlight Garden "(o)ne of the mid-west's most modern roller rinks." Moonlight Garden boasts all of the accessory units associated with indoor skating fun. A plastic skating surface keeps the floor space immaculate. Organist Ward Johnson provides the "mood music" to keep skaters in rhythm with each other. "Live" music is spelled by intermittent recordings. There is also a snack bar and soda fountain, check lockers, skate repair shop and skate rental booth.

State Journal-Register writer Doug Pokorski went into more detail about Moonlight Garden's operations in a 2002 article. In the 1950s, the rink was open to the public from 7:30 to 10:30 p.m. nightly except Mondays, with afternoon matinees on weekends. The

Garden could – and often did, Pokorski wrote – accommodate 2,000 skaters at a time.

The regular admission fee was 50 cents, and both skaters and spectators had to follow the rules. Pokorski quoted from a Moonlight Garden brochure:

All rowdyism is barred, and no drinking of alcohol is permitted at any time...

Shorts of all types are banned for spectators and skaters in the rink, except for children five years of age and under. Bermuda shorts are not permitted, but pedal pushers are acceptable when they are of below the knee length, while no overalls or jeans are allowed for skating except on Saturday matinees or Wednesdays, which are listed as novelty hillbilly nights, or for private parties. All skaters must be neatly dressed at all times.

Roy Dexheimer Sr. died in a car-train collision Dec. 6, 1956. Son Roy Jr. kept Moonlight Garden going until changing tastes brought good times at the Garden to their close. The palace Roy Dexheimer rebuilt in 1936 was dismantled in 1967.

Written by Mike Kienzler
SangamonLink editor

Find SangamonLink at:
sangamoncountyhistory.org



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2020-2021 SCHS MEMBERSHIP FORM

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 Lifetime Membership - \$700 (*one time fee*) College/University Student (individual) - \$20.

Your Name _____

Spouse/Significant Other Name (where applicable): _____

Spouse's Maiden Name (where applicable): _____

Full Names of others included in your membership: _____

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This is a GIFT for: (Name of Recipient, Mailing Address (Street, City, State, Zip)) _____

I am adding a donation of \$ _____.

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