By Cliff Krainik

She was born in a blinding Wisconsin snowstorm and delivered by a veterinarian because the local doctor couldn’t make it through the drifts. With two younger sisters she grew up as a tomboy in a blue-collar part of Milwaukee. From her earliest memories, Ava Avery knew she wanted to be an artist. She could construct whole childhood wardrobes out of brightly colored papers and paste. In high school she was an award-winning painter, and if circumstances had allowed, she would have continued her artistic training.

But, as with many other dreamers, the Great Depression placed harsh limitations on non-income-producing activities, and besides, Mama did not approve of Ava’s career choice. Nonetheless, Ava continued to follow Art’s siren call and applied for entry in Milwaukee’s first outdoor art fair in 1932. That’s when she met and fell in love with the tall, handsome artist Max Fernekes. On their marriage certificate, bride and groom each listed their occupation as artist, and that’s how they continued for over 50 years.

In the winter of 1940, Max and Ava with their two beautiful young blond daughters, moved southwest from congested Milwaukee to the Driftless region and purchased a dilapidated Cornish stone house in Mineral Point. The decrepit building presented major challenges: It lacked drinking water, indoor plumbing, electricity and central heat. So began Max and Ava’s lifelong project to reclaim the building and make it their home. This struggle, of course, was in addition to making a living solely through the sale of their art: Neither Max or Ava held what their neighbors called “regular jobs.”

Max was a prolific watercolorist specializing in the realistic depiction of majestic rural views, the old homesteads and stone buildings of the early settlers. His work received acclaim with numerous showings in prestigious galleries in Milwaukee and at the Wisconsin Historical Society. Ava’s art was equally prolific and commercially successful, but far less recognized. She began her career working with crafts — straw dolls and small decorative boxes and eventually turned to tempera painting. Ever inventive, Ava created a universe of fantasy portraits tailored for children’s bedrooms including pixies, fairies, goblins and mermaids. To this body of work Ava added a series known as her “Children of the World” — an edition of tempera-painted sketches that featured full-length costumed portraits of children from various countries. Her images of boys and girls

Premiere Exhibit Recalls Ava Fernekes, Creative Genius of ‘Wit and Whimsy’

Photograph courtesy of Ray Barth

Portrait of the artist at work. Ava Fernekes was an accomplished painter and potter who brought excitement and joy with her whimsical creative genius.
were sold in pairs for three dollars. Each child was portrayed in traditional ethnic garb and given names appropriate to their country of origin, like “Christian and Helga of Denmark” and “José and Maria of Mexico.” The 16- by 12-inch images were hand-traced by Ava’s daughters, Barbara and Julie, from Ava’s master hand-drawn template. In all she created over 200 different portraits.

Ava also perfected her own freestyle version of rosemaling, a 19th-century traditional Scandinavian decorative folk art that combined stylized geometric and floral elements with patterns of scrollwork. She excelled with her original interpretations of rosemaling, not simply copying staid traditional motifs. The artist took on commissions to decorate furniture, sometimes an entire truckload of items, and painted everything placed before her, from pianos to mousetraps!

In 1962, after years of working in different art mediums, Ava finally found an expression capable of keeping up with her unbounded fantasies. She was a self-taught potter who built her own kiln, experimenting with various clays and glazes to achieve results that satisfied her. Ava began by producing utilitarian pots and vases but found it boring. It was the little creatures and anatomically improbable animals that most delighted her. One critic acclaimed her ceramic sculptures as “glazed and modeled with wit and whimsy.” For decades Ava’s creative genius has been overshadowed by her husband’s notoriety, but change is in the wind. The premier exhibition of Ava’s playful creations is on display at the Mineral Point Historical Society at Orchard Lawn. The show, “The Whimsical World of Ava Fernikes,” features over 50 examples of her best paintings, pottery and rosemaling. After opening on Memorial Day Weekend, the exhibit continued through Cornish Festival Weekend Sept. 28-30.

Reprinted with permission from the June 2018 issue of Voice of the River Valley
Orchard Lawn Celebrates 150 Years of Existence

By Janelle Miller

If it wasn’t for 11 Mineral Point residents raising $800 to buy out a demolition contract in 1939, Orchard Lawn would cease to exist, and because of their act, Orchard Lawn celebrated its 150th anniversary this summer. Those 11 residents would go on to form the Mineral Point Historical Society and have their headquarters at Orchard Lawn.

Joseph Gundry purchased the land that was to become Orchard Lawn in several different purchases throughout 1864 and 1868. Gundry spent a total of $2,420.05 on land and would go on to hire Steven V. Shipman to design his family home for a fee of $100. He was a well-known architect whose work included the rotunda and dome of the second State Capitol and the American Exchange Bank in Madison.

“Later he...became one of the principal architects of that city’s [Chicago’s] reconstruction after the disastrous fire of 1871,” according to Joan Emerson Young. “Shipman designed the Gundry house in the architectural style known as Italianate, which was very popular throughout the country from the mid-1850s through the 1880s. Its common features were overhanging eaves supported by brackets, round-headed windows with hood moldings, six-over-six sash with projecting consoles, and sometimes an oculus (round) window in the central gable. A final distinguishing feature was a small lookout tower, called a belvedere (or cupola), on top of the roof.” The belvedere was a remarkably effective air conditioning system, allowing hot air to escape through the roof when lower level windows were opened.

After the designs were finalized, Joseph and his wife, Sarah, were anxious for work to start on a new home for their large family – including formal gardens and lawns consisting of anything that would grow in the southwest Wisconsin climate.

After all was said and done, construction of the house would total $14,600 which is equal to about $197,100 in 2005. Construction commenced in 1867 and was finished in 1868. The 11-acre lot had been converted into a small farm which included a large house with a servants wing and several outbuildings such as a carriage barn, chicken coop, woodshed, ice house, laundry and privy building, and gazebo. Still standing is the original chicken coop. Two ornate gates guarded the main entrances (on Madison Street and Pine Street) surrounded by a wooden picket fence.

Five of the 11 acres were pasture land with the balance being formal lawns and gardens. Additionally, the grounds included an apple orchard and vegetable gardens along with a lawn tennis court in the early 1880s. “Joseph had a deep interest in the story of trees and plants. His diaries are filled with notes about the recommended plantings for the southwest Wisconsin climate, along with recipes for various potions to maintain the health of this gardens and orchards. At one time, there were 38 different species of native and imported trees and shrubs on the site,” Young explained.

“The Gundry family probably named their estate Orchard Lawn in deference to Joseph’s extensive plantings. Possibly, they mimicked the name of a familiar estate – Orchard Lawn – which is still on the outskirts of the little town of Porkellis where Joseph grew up.

Throughout the years, Orchard Lawn was updated as modern amenities became available. One such amenity was lighting. Orchard Lawn was most likely illuminated by kerosene throughout the house, and while it was effective, it was a very demanding source in terms of maintenance with servants probably devoting much time and energy to the care of kerosene lamps: chores included filling, wiping, wick trimming, re-wicking, and washing. In 1891, the first electric service was started by the Mineral Point Zinc Company which in turn founded the Mineral Point Electric Light Company. They provided electricity to public street lamps and private residences.”

See ORCHARD, page 4
ORCHARD

continued from page 3

Gundry children to live in Orchard Lawn, and he passed away in 1936. After that, the house stood vacant for years while the surviving heirs put the home on the market, lowering the price several times as it didn’t sell. They even offered to give the estate to the City of Mineral Point to be maintained as a museum, but they declined, instead wanting everything to be demolished and split into lots. In 1939, a demolition contract was purchased by the heirs to level the estate with the carriage house falling to the wrecking ball; however, the 11 residents then stepped in saving Orchard Lawn. The non-profit organization paid $1 to buy the title from the Gundry heirs.

Throughout their years of ownership, the Mineral Point Historical Society has endeavored to restore Orchard Lawn to its former glory — a restoration, not a remodeling or rehabilitation. The goal is to return Orchard Lawn to its appearance at some point in history. The building has gone through several restoration projects. The interior was restored to several different points in history as the Mineral Point Historical Society wanted to show how a house evolves under three generations meaning that the interior spaces are not restored to one specific date. Surviving physical evidence, photographic evidence, family documents, and important stories pertaining to each space were the criteria for selecting a date to return each space: formal parlor to 1870, library to 1890s, music room to 1885, foyer to 1905, dining room to 1900, and Joseph and Sarah’s bedchamber to the 1880s. The Mineral Point Historical Society has been tackling the restoration project in phases with phase II started in 2005 and still continuing.

Orchard Lawn celebrated 150 years with Jammin’ on the Porch this summer.

Bronze Plaque Program is an Overwhelming Success

By Mark Hogan

The Mineral Point Historical Society bronze plaque program is initiated to encourage building owners to purchase commemorative plaques indicating the original building name and the date constructed.

The program is intended to promote civic pride, an appreciation of our architectural heritage to both citizens and visitors alike, and an understanding how old these local buildings are in relation to the state and national historical context. It is also venture by the Mineral Point Historical Society to promote outreach into the community itself.

Initial expectation was for an order of 60 to 70 plaques. The final order was for 110 plaques, achieved over a five-week period.

Of these plaque orders, 45 were concentrated in the business district along High and Commerce Streets. This quantity met original expectations, achieved through personal appeals to commercial building owners.

Another lower scale marketing program was directed to about 400 owners of historic homes via personal letters, Facebook, and newspaper and newsletter articles. Response from homeowners was overwhelming and beyond expectations with orders for an additional 65 plaques.

MPHS initially prepared specifications and solicited bids from five manufacturers with the contract awarded to the low bidder, Franklin Bronze Plaques. Bids were based on a large quantity, semi-custom purchase. All plaques measure 8x11 inches, 3/8-inch thick with identical color, and primary verbiage.

On each individual plaque the original name of the building and date constructed is personalized on the first few lines. The customized verbiage is followed by the standard text “is a contributing building name and the date constructed.

See PLAQUE, page 5
Manager’s Message: Venue Rental Prices to Increase While New Exhibits Bolster Home Tours

The beginnings of fall have gently touched Orchard Lawn as I write this article. Trees are starting to blush because of the chilly nights, and there is increased activity in the lawn as wildlife busies to fill their winter nests. We are quickly coming to the end of our seasonal events of weddings, Jammin’ on the Porch Concert Series, and historical house tours.

Our Jammin’ on the Porch Summer Concert Series attendance was better than any other season due to the Mineral Point building in the City of Mineral Point Historic District listed on the National Register of Historic Places by the United States Department of the Interior.” This precise text required approval by the local preservation committee, which in turn, sought approval at the state and federal levels.

Similar plaque programs were proposed by other entities in 2009 and 2015. MPHS’s success was achieved by a quantity discount approach with all payments collected by the Society and a single purchase order to the manufacturer and a single delivery for all 110 plaques.

MPHS offered plaques at cost to building owners at the discounted rate proposed by the manufacturer. To ensure all plaques were displayed, MPHS offered to install plaques at a minimal mark-up expense. The installation, by volunteer labor, provided a modest profit to the Society.

Last year’s program was to be a one-time offer, but MPHS was approached by numerous building owners, having seen the result of our efforts, to acquire, their own plaque. In 2018, we re-opened the program for interested parties. Another 25 plaques were installed in September.

PLAQUE

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Review of 2018 Lyceum Series

Preservation, World War I, and Women Activists Presented in 2018 Lyceums

By Lyn Strangstad

The Mineral Point Historical Society began its 2018 lyceum series on January 21 following the annual meeting. Meetings this year were held at the United Methodist Church, which is a good space for these events.

The January meeting, “So You Want to Restore Your Old House?” featured local preservationists who discussed projects they had undertaken and the hurdles they overcame, along with tips on getting started, finding the right professionals, resources, and how to ensure preserving the integrity of the house. Presenters Diane Stuart, Jim Stroschein, and Ried Knapp offered slides of their extraordinary work.

In addition, some general tips offered included understanding the different goals and their approaches to the work, the need to preserve details, understand methods and materials, and rely on sound resources and qualified craftsmen.

Following the panel presentation, the discussion was opened to the audience for questions and comments. Many in attendance agreed that this topic should be presented again in future lyceums.

In February, Leslie Bellais, Curator of Social History at the Wisconsin State Historical Society, gave the presentation “Over Here: The Wisconsin Homefront in World War I.” Commenting on her doctoral work, she discussed the ways a variety of Wisconsin citizens experienced the state’s tension-filled atmosphere during the 18 months America participated in World War I. This topic further expands the Society’s theme of World War I in Wisconsin as shown in the Homer Ludden exhibit at Orchard Lawn, viewable at Orchard Lawn through the end of the tour season. Bellais’s interest is in how the name of “Traitor State” came to apply to Wisconsinites and how this name affected their behavior during the war. Some Wisconsinites sought to prove their loyalty and patriotism through sacrifice and hard work; others resorted to vigilantism.

The program was enlightening and thought-provoking, offering many listeners a new understanding of Wisconsin during World War I.

Following the program, Mary Knudson was present and offered her new book, The Mills of Iowa County, for sale to the group.

Paula vW. Dail, Ph.D. spoke at our March lyceum held March 18. Her topic, “We Rise to Resist: Lesser Known Stories of Past and Present Wisconsin Women Activists” was a fitting theme for March, Women’s History Month.

Kathy Steffen, an award-winning novelist and author from Spring Green, also presented a reading of her essay taken from the book. Paula and Kathy were available following the presentation to answer questions and sign books.

Barbara Fernekes Hughes Visits Ava’s Exhibit this Summer

Barbara Fernekes Hughes, Max and Ava’s daughter, was in Mineral Point this summer. She stopped and toured her mother’s exhibit while she was in town for a high school class reunion. Barbara is an artist who lives in Wauwatosa, Wis.

Photo courtesy of Cindy Taylor

Barbara Fernekes Hughes Visits Ava’s Exhibit this Summer
With Orchard Lawn turning 150 years old this summer, it was a Jammin’ on the Porch concert series to remember - in fact, there was even a marriage proposal! Children and adults alike had fun dancing and listening to a wide variety of talented artists and bands. New this year, each evening was sponsored by a business which we hope to continue next year.
Mark Your Calendars

Friday, Oct. 26
Orchard Lawn; 6-8 p.m.
The Whimsical World of Ava Fernekes
Special Concluding Exhibit

Saturday, Dec. 1
Cornish Pocket Park; 6 p.m.
Christmas Caroling: We have songbooks or bring your own.

Sunday, Dec. 9
Orchard Lawn; 1-3 p.m.
Christmas: Reading of “The Gift of the Magi,” musical offerings, Christmas treats, and conversation

Sunday, Jan. 20, 2019
United Methodist Church; 1 p.m. (Annual Meeting), 2 p.m. (Old-Timers’ Talk)
Mineral Point Artists, Past & Present

www.mineralpointhistory.org

Special Reception to Conclude Fernekes Exhibit

The Mineral Point Historical Society wishes to extend an invitation to the public to attend a special reception concluding the exhibition, *The Whimsical World of Ava Fernekes*, on Friday, Oct. 26, from 6 to 8 p.m.

The show features 50 examples of the artist’s best paintings, pottery, and rosemaling. Ava and her celebrated artist husband, Max Fernekes, worked in Mineral Point for 50 years producing a vast and varied array of art and were recently featured in the summer issue of *Wisconsin Magazine of History*.

Come meet guest curator Cliff Krainik from Warrenton, Virginia and share with him any story you may have about Ava and Max for possible inclusion in his upcoming biography of the dynamic duo. *Free to the public.*

The flamboyant Ava Fernekes wore a Mexican hat made from purple-dyed chicken feathers at a 1965 Wisconsin Art Fair.

Photo courtesy of Ray Barth