

# Tecumseh Historical Society

## NEWSLETTER

Volume 52, Issue 1

SPRING 2026

### “THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT”

The advent and rise of e-commerce have left an indelible impact on retail shopping markets. At the mere click or swipe, almost any product or service is available for delivery on the doorstep, often in a matter of hours or days. These on-line retailers have thrived, much at the expense of the traditional retail stores and small local shops. Shopping malls, a major meeting-place for generations, have been shuttered, torn down, or repurposed. Major box-store retailers once considered iconic brands in society have since closed their brick-and-mortar stores and opted to focus on the trend toward e-commerce. While the future for retail stores is uncertain, retailers are focusing on their customers to embrace a personal shopping experience. For them, shopping is more than a mouse click or an end to a means, it is meant to be enjoyed. This concept dates back to the golden age of retailing in Europe and America when major retailers were household names.

The Industrial Revolution of the 1800's brought great changes to society including the proliferation of many goods and products. What was once made only by hand-crafting could now be mass produced by machines at a much lower cost and in greater quantities. It also saw the emergence of major retailers to capitalize on the opportunity: Harrod's - London (1834), Macy's - New York (1858), Marshall Fields - Chicago (1865), Sears - Chicago (1898). These retailers

operated major department stores where shoppers could stroll by displays of merchandise at their leisure, an idea that harkens back to the grand arcades and marketplaces of Paris in the 1700's.

Harry Gordon Selfridge grasped upon the opportunity when he opened his own store:

“Selfridges” – London (1909).

Selfridge's store would grow and thrive to become a rival of the greatest department stores of the era by creating a unique and memorable shopping experience. Harry Selfridge believed in focusing on customer satisfaction and the mantra, “The Customer is Always Right.” For Harry, shopping was meant to be enjoyed, a leisurely experience in a comfortable setting where customers could relax and indulge.

Harry Gordon Selfridge was born in 1858 and lived in Jackson, Michigan as a young child. His father Robert operated a small general store until he enlisted in the Union army at the outbreak of the Civil



*Harry Gordon Selfridge*

War. Robert never returned home; he disappeared after receiving a dishonorable discharge from military service. About the same time, Harry's two young brothers died which left him and his mother, Lois, alone; they would live together for the remainder of her life. Lois moved to Tecumseh for a short time to be near her family who were among the original settlers to Lenawee County; Levi Baxter came to Tecumseh in the 1820's where Lois was born in 1834. At the time, Harry's Uncle

*(Continued on page 2)*

# “THE CUSTOMER IS ALWAYS RIGHT”

(Continued from page 1)

Benjamin Baxter was the editor of the Tecumseh Herald, a lawyer, and prominent in local business circles.

For a few years, Harry attended school in Tecumseh, then located at the old courthouse building. He lived at Uncle Benjamin's house located at the present-day site of the Carnegie Library.

Harry's meteoric rise to fame and success began as a stock boy in Chicago where he caught the eye of Marshall Fields, the store's owner. The success of Field's store in Chicago paralleled Harry's many promotions within the company. Over the next 25 years, Harry's career thrived, eventually he became president of the company. In 1890,

he married Rose Buckingham from a wealthy family and the couple settled into a fine mansion along Chicago's fashionable Lakeshore Drive.

By 1909, the Selfridges had amassed a considerable fortune. Along with Harry's success, Rose owned a lucrative real estate business in Chicago. Harry decided to leave his position with Marshall Fields and strike out on his own. His vision was to open a large department store in London to rival the finest establishments in Europe. He invested much of their personal wealth to start-up the store which opened in London's West End. Critics were surprised when the store was built on Oxford Street in what was then a rather undesirable neighborhood, but it was located adjacent to a busy subway station to ensure a steady flow of foot traffic.

Many were impressed at the extravagant expense of furnishing Selfridge's store. The finest tapestries and art by well-known artists adorned the walls. Customers could enjoy fine dining at several reasonably-priced restaurants. Selfridges included a library and a "silence room" with dimmed lighting and comfortable lounges. Over-stuffed couches and chairs were strategically placed around the store for the customer's leisure. Sod was laid on the roof of the building where guests attended garden parties and fashion shows. A golf course on the roof featured scenic views of London's skyline.

The layout of Selfridge's promoted a visceral shopping experience where customers strolled through displays of products that could be touched and handled. Before the advent of large department stores, products and goods



*Selfridge's Store in London*

were limited at small local stores or through mail shoppers such as Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Wards. Selfridges changed that paradigm, which fueled the success of the store.

Selfridge's rising fortunes created great wealth for Harry and Rose and they soon became well-known in London society circles. Harry earned the sobriquet: the "Lord of Oxford Street". The Selfridges lived in luxury at Lansdowne House in Westminster where they lavishly entertained London's elite. Writer Rudyard Kipling and members of the British royal family were frequent visitors. During World War I, Rose managed a convalescent hospital on the grounds of the estate to care for wounded soldiers. Unfortunately, Rose fell victim to the influenza epidemic and died in 1918. His mother Lois died a few years later, leaving Harry alone in his massive estate home.

While there were many changes to Harry's personal life, the challenging business environment created severe financial risk for his department store. The Great Depression in 1929 caused many businesses to collapse as disposable income disappeared for many; it cratered the retail markets. Like many other stores, Selfridge's fell into difficult financial times and struggled to survive. By the late 1930's, the store was grossly over-capitalized which led to Harry's forced retirement by his debtors.

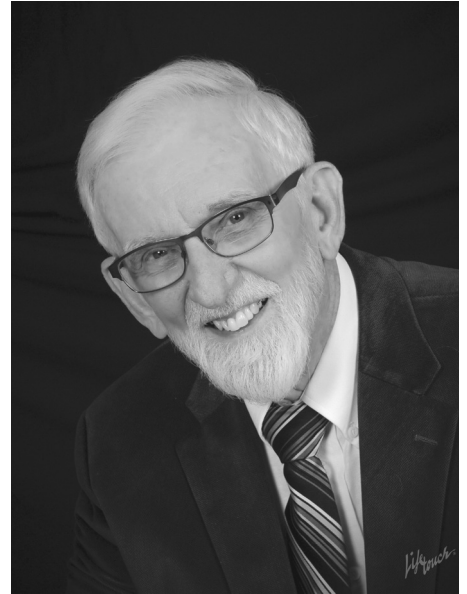
At first, he retired to his upscale mansion in London. But Harry's free-spending ways and unwise investments caused him to lose almost all of his personal wealth. In his elderly years, he lived in a modest apartment in London's Putney

neighborhood. Harry died in 1947 at the age of 89, virtually penniless. He was buried in London next to his wife and mother.

From his humble beginnings in Southern Michigan, Harry's life rose with the arc of the golden age of retailing to establish an iconic department store that still bears his name to this day. The store maintains its customer focus that embodies the spirit of Harry Gordon Selfridge in its mission statement: "Since we opened our doors in March 1909, Selfridges London has been so much more than a shop – it's a creative playground where you can socialise, get inspired and explore positive ideas. Discover our experiences and services and plan your next extraordinary day out at Selfridges."

## WITH FOND MEMORIES...

The City of Tecumseh and the Historical Society lost a friend and long-time resident Ashley Chase recently. Ashley was an avid collector of Tecumseh History and was always willing to help with resources and guidance. He authored and assisted with several books on Tecumseh's history. We will greatly miss Ashley and wish sincere condolences to his family.



## WHAT'S NEW AT THE MUSEUM?

***We're OPEN for the 2026 season. It's your hometown museum, please stop by.***

- Thanks to a grant from the State of Michigan "250MI", computer tablets have been installed around the museum that display various topics on Tecumseh's history. A continuous loop will display vintage family movies, oral history interviews, old-time footage of working at Tecumseh Products, etc. Thanks to Chad Smith and Deb Kogelman for their work and dedication.
- The Oral History Project has been busy interviewing residents who are interested in sharing their memories of life in Tecumseh. Please contact the museum if you'd like to participate. Interviews can be anonymous. (See contact info)
- Student Writing Project is available to interested students who want to research and compose topics on Tecumseh's history. Completed articles maybe used in an upcoming newsletter or the Look Back Page of the Tecumseh Herald.
- Congratulations to Annabelle Buechele-Beasecker, a 3rd grade student at Tecumseh Acres who won the regional History Day Project competition. Annabelle's presentation focused the role of women working during World War II. She donned a "Rosie the Riveter" costume to set the tone. Annabelle will compete at the state level competition on April 25th. Good Luck, Annabelle! We're rooting for you.
- Our staff was busy at the museum during the off-season:
  - New displays at the museum feature vintage women's fashion, a tribute to USA's 250th anniversary, main street Tecumseh in the past, and antique photos of Tecumseh's sport teams.
  - The vestibule at the museum was painted and re-imagined. Thanks to Carol Duncan-Poore and Gary Honeycutt for their beautiful work.
  - ***We need Volunteers!*** Docents are always needed to greet visitors at the museum. You don't have to be an expert on Tecumseh history, just stop by, hang-out, and have some fun.

## CONTACT US AT THE MUSEUM

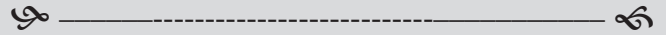
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Web: [www.historictecumseh.org](http://www.historictecumseh.org)  
Friend us on Facebook  
TAHS49286

◆  
Museum is open on Saturdays  
(10:30 am to 3:30 pm)  
from April through mid-December.



### BOARD MEMBERS

**PRESIDENT:** Gary Naugle

**1ST VICE PRESIDENT:** Michael Hrivnak

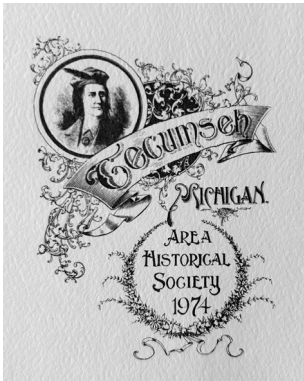
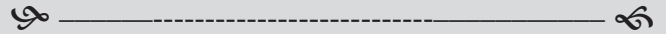
**2ND VICE PRESIDENT:** Deb Kogelman

**TREASURER:**

**SECRETARY:** Carol Duncan-Poore

**ASSISTANT SECRETARY/TREASURER:**  
Gary Honeycutt

**HISTORIAN:** Robert Elliott



### TECUMSEH AREA HISTORICAL SOCIETY

PO Box 26  
Tecumseh, MI 49286

The museum is located at  
*302 E. Chicago Blvd.*