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RESORTER & Weekender

Section B to The Commercial Record

Museum hosts 'Cold War/Hot Towns' redux

The second half of a two-year "Cold War/Hot Towns" exhibition at the Saugatuck-Douglas History Museum opens for the season on Memorial Day weekend Saturday, May 26, at noon.

The museum occupies the historic Saugatuck Pump House at 735 Park St. in a scenic garden setting along the west bank of the Kalamazoo River at Mt. Baldhead Park, a short walk north from the Saugatuck Chain Ferry landing. Admission and nearby parking are free. It will remain open daily from noon to 4 p.m. through Labor Day, then with the same hours every Saturday and Sunday through September and October.

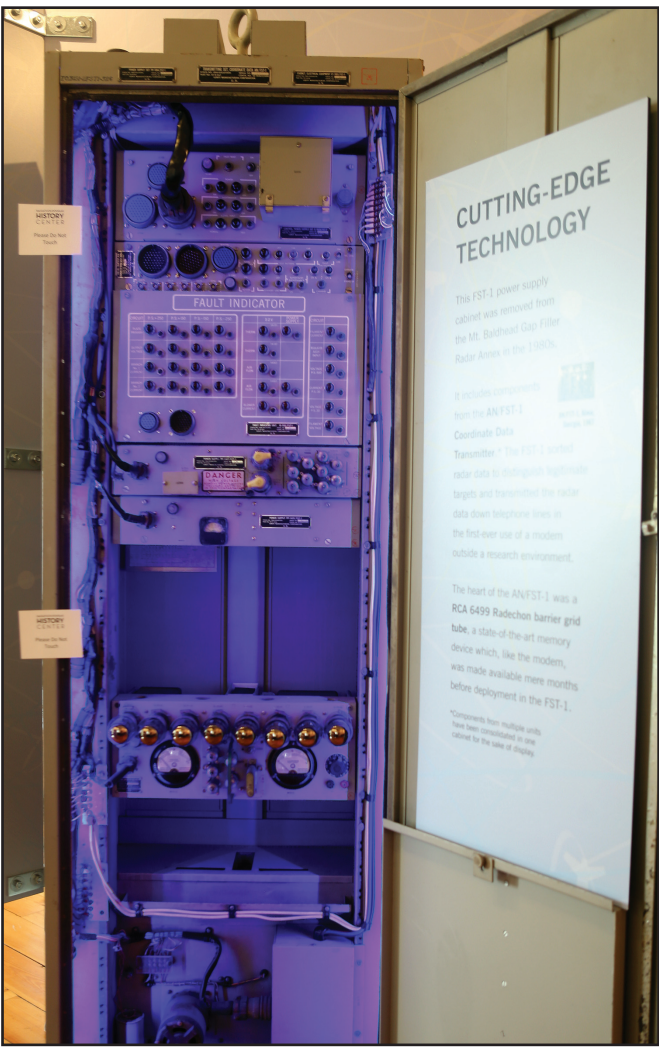
The exhibition, titled "Cold War/Hot Towns ... Saugatuck-Douglas in the 1950s-1970s," relates how a sleepy resort community became a battlefield for conflicting "invasions" in the unpredictable and scary early years of the nuclear age, focusing especially on the nearby Mt. Baldhead sand dune's role.

Highlighting this year's presentation is a newly edited 8-minute video capturing the essence of a 25-minute 1966 TV documentary "Hot Town - Summer In Saugatuck."

The original sparked controversy when then-Village President Lynn McCray



Saugatuck-Douglas History Center volunteers Erik Kirchert and Sally Winthers rehang a Sputnik-style 'satellite' for the 2018 season, one of many exhibition items removed from harm's way last fall while the Pump House Museum received a new roof.



Instrument panel from radar dome headquarters.

feared its focus on carousing college kids would overwhelm the town's peaceful, family-vacation image with a more raucous one, and threatened legal action to prevent WOOD-TV from airing it ... which they did anyway.

The exhibition's centerpiece, a 13-foot-tall obelisk depicting the iconic Mt. Baldhead radar tower, features a four-sided display including pieces of the original radar instrumentation and an explanatory video presentation.

The display dramatizes both the Cold War's existential tensions and the tower's creation in 1956 as part of America's first electronic early-warning system against airborne attack.

A high-tech marvel in its day, this radar network was designed to replace human skywatching plane spotters with longer-range vision.

Initially built with no enclosing dome, the tower's relentlessly rotating radar dish was part of a network that loomed over a divided nation in an unsettling era of fallout shelters, school "duck and cover" practice and air-raid drills.

Ironically, it symbolized both the state-of-the-art in defensive protection and the silent, pervasive fear that a nuclear nightmare could start at any moment.

Around the exhibition's periphery, the community's concurrent cultural changes unfold in successive text and visual panels, enhanced with slideshow and video presentations. They tell the story of how, after the Great Depression and WWII, Saugatuck's era of resort vacationing faded to what seemed a symbolic end when the Big Pavilion burned down in 1960.

The story continues, detailing how the community rebuilt its "brand," refreshing Oval Beach with a new bathhouse and adding new riverside docks extended to become the state's longest boardwalk, lined with restaurants, bars and tourist accommodations.

Development soon attracted fashionable yachts and sleek motorboats, sailing races, water skiing and sport fishing — and the nickname "Michigan's Riviera."

Seeking a stronger competitive edge, Saugatuck

also launched a series of music festivals so successful that they drew in an explosive mix of wild youth in fast cars, college students, hippies and motorcycle gangs, who arrived on summer weekends by the thousands ... leading to drunken riots and property damage.

Local authorities had their hands full, but the music played on, the visitors had a blast and Saugatuck's nickname changed to the "Hottest Town in Michigan."

To test the memories of those old enough to recall the era, the exhibition includes a "Guess The Decades" game inviting visitors to match trivia with the 1950s, '60s or '70s, focusing on "hottest" car, song, fashion, etc.

A "feedback station" will invite visitors to leave written memories of the era or comments about the exhibition, offering an e-mail portal through which they can later share Saugatuck-area experiences or photos reflecting those years.

Visitors' Stories Featured
Also enhancing the exhibi-

tion this year will be a new display featuring recollections generated by visitor response to last year's feedback station, along with a national map inviting visitors to pin-mark their home locations.

The museum's south gallery gift shop again will offer limited-edition "Cold War/Hot Towns" t-shirts.

Continuing the SDHC tradition of offering locally-authored books created to accompany exhibits, the shop also highlights the Big Pavilion book by Saugatuck author-historian Kit Lane, telling the story of the town's grandest attraction from its construction in 1909 to the day it burned down in May 1960.

Joining these is an assortment of other unique Saugatuck-Douglas themed items, including postcards, posters, hats, shirts, and books, and a very limited supply of wooden pens, hand-crafted by students in the Saugatuck High School industrial arts program from lumbering-era timber retrieved from the Kalamazoo River.

To learn more about SDHC, its Pump House Museum and Old School House in Douglas, visit MySDHistory.org.