

WALKING WITH THE GERBERS

In the days when Douglas was still a port town, one of the best known families in Douglas was the Gerber family, the founders of the Gerber's baby food company. While they later moved off to Fremont to found the company that would feed generations of our nation's young, their fortune began in Douglas. Like many others, the Gerbers were interested in cutting down trees—particularly the hemlocks from which they harvested bark for use in making hides into leather. They operated a leather tanning factory on Tannery Creek at about the site of present-day Wade's Bayou Park along Water Street. They also operated a lumber mill at the foot of Center Street, owned part of the local Saugatuck bank, and (later) were partners in the Douglas Basket Factory, located at the foot of the bridge on the Douglas side. Much of what the Gerbers produced here in Douglas—leather, lumber, baskets—was shipped to Chicago, but many of their real estate holdings were at one time or another destroyed by fire: the tannery, the mill, the basket factory and their big house on Center

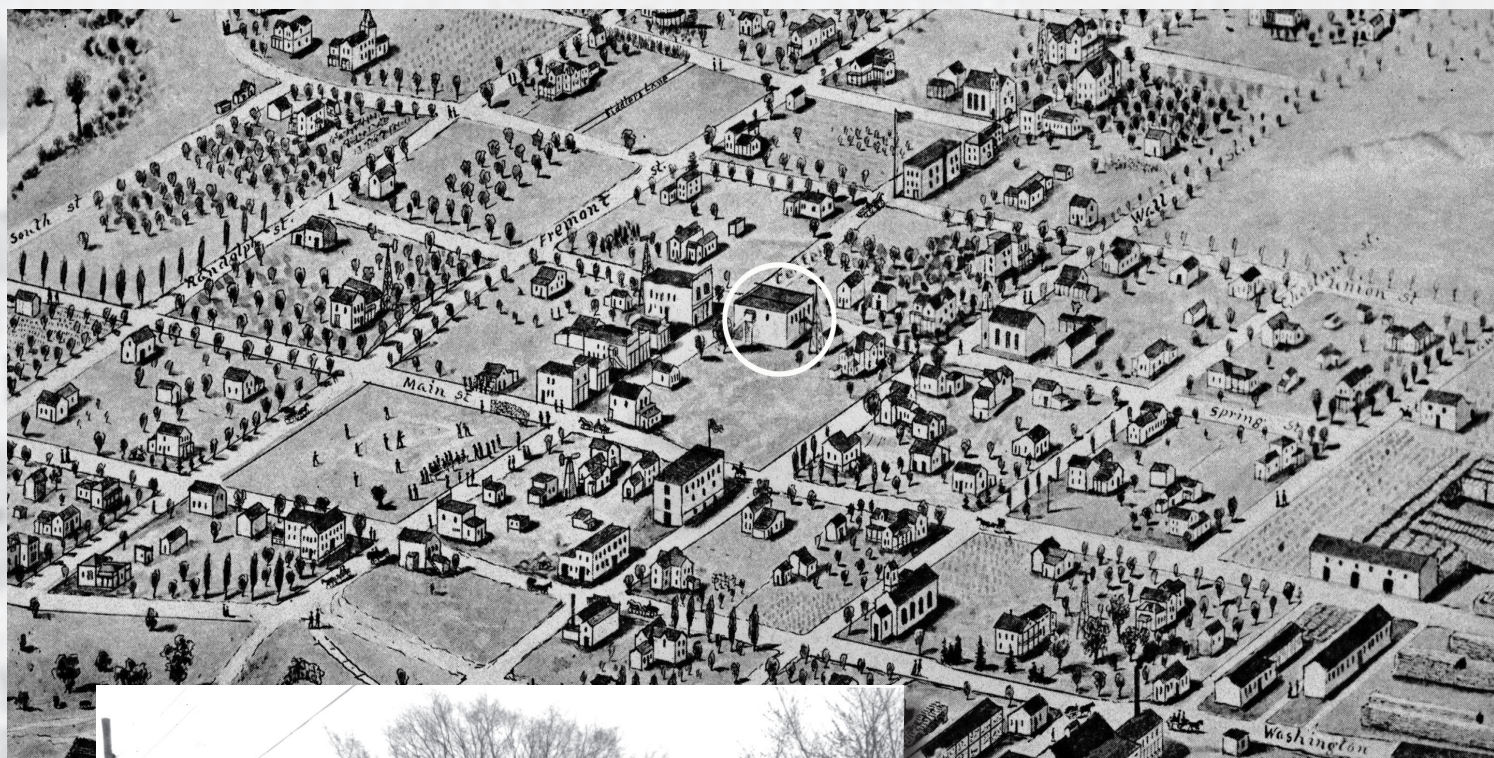
Street. In fact, even one of the Gerber cargo boats was lost in the great Chicago fire of 1871.

A number of local houses are remembered as Gerber houses, including several on Union Street and a rather grand house called "Harbor View" at the corner of Ellis and Center Street (lost to fire in 1984) where, it is said, Thor Heyerdahl penned the last chapter of his book Kon Tiki. Daniel Gerber (1820-1890) was the founder of the Douglas Gerber clan, and one of his last ventures in his life in Douglas was to build the store pictured here. It was one of the few brick buildings in the village, and in 1896 the west half of the building housed L. W. McDonald's general store, called "The People's Store." The east side of the building was Mr. Norton's drug store and soda fountain (seen in this feature in June). The upper floor had various uses, including the meeting place of a lodge called the Maccabees. It is perhaps best remembered in recent years as part of St. Peter's school—and still later (from 1982) the Township offices.

Little did Ed Sisk and Ed Strange know when they began the restoration of the neglected Commercial Italianate structure in the mid-1990s—uncovering the origi-

nal fronts and the fine cornice and brackets at the roof line to reveal a splendid facade—that their project would give birth to what would become the "Douglas Renaissance," which would result in a broader movement to restore, reconstruct, and revitalize the historic village of Douglas. Since then, the McDonald Building has been home to a number of shops—today housing the Rocking Bear shop and Johnny Blue Gallery. Few who walk down Center Street today could know the long, historic lineage of the present-day structure that was at one time the seat of modernity for the village: the first modern grocery and (behind the building, still standing) the Ford automobile garage. This leaves us with quite a bit to think about.

Baby food? Well, some say it was invented here in Douglas in the family kitchen and from fruits from Douglas orchards—but the official Gerber Baby Food company spin on it is that the first of the baby food was invented in Fremont, where the Gerbers had settled in 1901. *By Jim Schmiechen*



Left - 1907 Birds-eye drawing of Douglas. The Gerber building is circled.

Lower left - The building in 1991 before renovation.

Lower right - The restored building as it looks today.



The Remembering When feature is the creation of Jack Sheridan and Jim Schmiechen of the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society. We remind our readers that this year's SDHS Pumphouse Museum exhibit titled "Lincoln's Ready-Made Soldiers: Saugatuck Area Men in the Civil War" is now open. The historic museum is located on the west side of the Kalamazoo River at the foot of Mt. Baldhead. It is open daily, noon to 4 p.m. until Labor Day, and then on fall weekends. There is no admission charge.

In addition, special presentations featuring various historical topics will be presented at the museum on Tues-

days and Saturdays, 11 a.m. to noon, beginning June 21.

We welcome your comments on Remembering When. Call 269 857-7901, email us at sdhistory@accn.org or write to Box 617 Douglas, MI 49406. SDHS historical images can be seen on the SDHS web site at www.sdhistory.com and all historical photos are available for purchase in print sizes up to 12x17.

Our historical image database is growing through your contributions. We scan your old photos—you keep the originals—and we then provide you with a CD of your digitized images.

