

The Scribe

HISTORY CENTER OF OLMSTED COUNTY

SPRING 2025 Newsletter



HISTORY CENTER
OF OLMSTED COUNTY

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FAREWELL AND STAY ENGAGED WITH YOUR HISTORY!

By Wayne Gannaway, Executive Director

When I returned to Minnesota from Connecticut, my family and I landed in Duluth, a city variously known as a Great Lakes port for mining and a tourism destination. With its Canal Park and North Shore Scenic Byway, Duluth has become known by the nickname, the Scandinavian Riviera. That's where I bought my first pair of snowshoes, watched a dog sledding race for the first time, and witnessed black bears ambling down city streets. I spent three years there working for the Arrowhead Regional Development Corporation's National Scenic Byway Program. So, Rebecca and I are looking forward to returning to the Northland.

We've accomplished a lot together at the History Center: restoring the Stoppel smokehouse (more accurately termed a "backhouse"), beginning work on the barn, and creating an award-winning interpretive plan for the farmstead; giving our creepy dolls (and the History Center) time in the national spotlight; and working with partners and sponsors to bring more people to our campus through free admission, events, and the farmer's market (in partnership with the Village Agricultural Cooperative).

More exciting days lie ahead. More than 22,000 students attend public schools in Olmsted County, with 17,000 attending RPS alone. To help us reach this audience (and their families), HCOC hired Valerie Wassmer as the Education/Associate Director, who taught at John Marshall High School for 24 years. She has already kick started our programs for all ages and is creating relevant experiences for student field trips. On top of that, Valerie is the interim executive director until my successor is hired.

I'll be cheering on Valerie and the entire History Center family from a distance.

REMINDER: Please make sure we have the most up-to-date email and mailing address for you. Thanks!



TAKING THE NEXT STEPS IN REJUVENATION

By Mark A. Warner, M.D., President

There is a lot to love about the History Center. For example, our historical preservation continues to grow and thrive under the leadership of archivist Krista Lewis and the many remarkable members who serve as our society's volunteers.

Our educational programs, hindered during the pandemic, are making a strong comeback as Valerie Wassmer, our Director of Education (and interim Executive Director), and Chris Delisle, our new education assistant, grow the breadth and number of programs for members of all ages.

In the midst of this good news, however, it is notable that many of our physical structures need to be updated, restored, or expanded. We are fortunate that Mayowood has been beautifully restored by our colleagues at Mayo Clinic during the past decade. If you have not visited it recently, please consider taking a tour with our History Center staff. You will be impressed with both the improved infrastructure as well as the revitalized historical content of the mansion and its grounds.

We now need to turn our attention to rejuvenating the structures and grounds of our 54-acre campus. In the coming month, the History Center's Board of Directors will complete its Master Plan for the campus. However, even before completing the Master Plan, we know that its highest priority is to restore the George Stoppel Farmstead. The farmstead is comprised of three primary structures, each included in the National Registry of Historical Places. These have great risk of deterioration and loss of any structures on our campus.

As Valerie Wassmer reports in this issue of the *The Scribe*, much effort and many resources have already been put into restoration of the Stoppel smokehouse. More than \$600,000 provided by the state's Legacy Fund, as well as grateful donors, have dramatically improved this building and its unique caves. In the next few months, the staff will activate new signage and exhibits related to the smokehouse, making it widely available to our members and visitors. Its grand opening is June 21st this summer.

The History Center is next focusing its fundraising and preservation efforts on finalizing restoration of the Stoppel barn and home. This \$3 million project has already started, with improvements to the barn's siding and support structures. A new roof, paint, and other infrastructure improvements will follow this spring and summer. We anticipate having signage and exhibits in place by late summer or early autumn. Work on the house should commence in the spring of 2026.

As we work towards completion of the restoration of the Stoppel Farmstead, we also are planning for expansion and rejuvenation of the History Center and its surrounding grounds. Our History Center is more than 50 years old, with many of the same infrastructure issues that many people face with their aging homes. It also is woefully short on space for educational programs and other activities that will attract young and old alike.

To fund these major restoration initiatives, we will be seeking support that exceeds \$3 million. To date, we have spent \$1.1 million on the smokehouse and barn. We also have a pledge of nearly \$850,000 from a family foundation that can be used on the farmstead's rejuvenation, if matched 2:1 with additional fundraising efforts (\$1.7 million). To that end, we are seeking state support through bonding and its Legacy Funds and grants from other organizations. We also will be starting a fundraising effort locally this summer.

I am blessed to lead an enthusiastic, accomplished Board of Directors and serve with a revitalized, engaged staff that want to see the History Center grow its value to the communities of Olmsted County. The projects outlined above will not occur overnight, but you will see continual progress in the coming months.

The rejuvenation of the History Center, both physically and with its accelerating contributions to historical preservation and education, will be exciting . . . and vital to the community.

INTERPRETING MAYOWOOD HISTORIC HOME

By Molli Funk, Historic Mayowood Site Manager

The 2025 tour season will be upon us shortly, with the Mayowood Historic Home opening for tours on April 2nd. As in past years, there is much to be done before the first tour is conducted. I imagine that the majority of our members have visited a historical home at some point in their lifetime, including Mayowood, but have you ever wondered what interpreting history through a guided tour entails?

Author Freeman Tilden, considered to be the father of heritage interpretation, stated in his book *Interpreting Our Heritage* that interpretation is “an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”

Here at HCOC we strive to do the same. Interpreting the Mayowood artifacts, buildings, grounds, and stories of those who lived and worked at Mayowood is much more than memorizing a presentation and delivering it to guests on tour. Mayowood tour guides have learned to translate Mayowood artifacts in terms of the time and place it was used. They use the stories of the Mayo family and staff to provide context to our visitors about Mayowood itself and the lives of those who lived there.

Employees and researchers at HCOC have spent countless hours researching the historical facts and stories of Mayowood. HCOC only relays factual information to our guests, as we are dedicated to educating the public. But wait, that is not all! Interpretation has a lot to do with technique. Mayowood guides are experts at keeping their guest's attention through storytelling, analogies, and open-ended questions.

So next time you visit Mayowood or one of the thousands of historical houses nationwide, consider the work behind the tour.

For those at HCOC it is not only a dedication to educating our visitors through the art of interpretation, but it is also a labor of love by a dedicated historical staff!



Tour guides Elizabeth Schmidt, Megan Magnuson, and Dana Knaak standing in Mayowood Gallery discussing the Mayowood Guide Script.

SAY HELLO TO OUR NEW EDUCATION ASSISTANT

Hello, my name is Chris Delisle and I am excited to join the Education team at the History Center of Olmsted County.

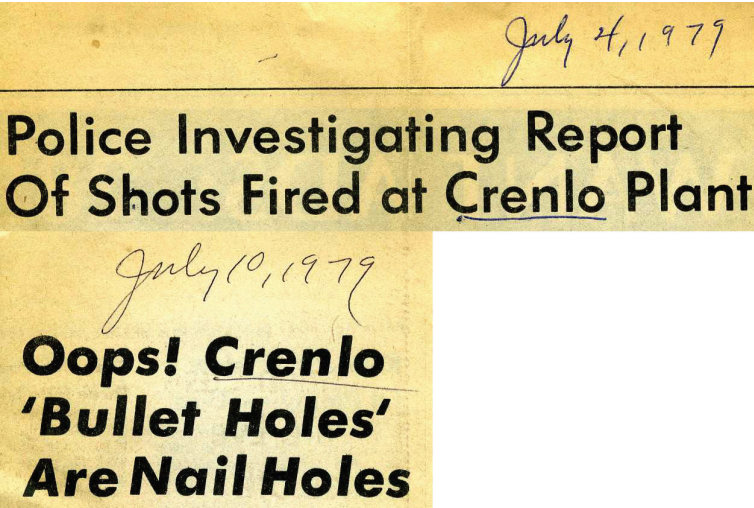
I have a strong passion for the preservation of history and historical objects, so the opportunity to share knowledge and understanding of the past is inspiring to me. My interests lie within art, music, history, animals, and food.

I live with my wife and two children on our hobby farm in Rochester where we raise goats, chickens, and many other lovely critters.

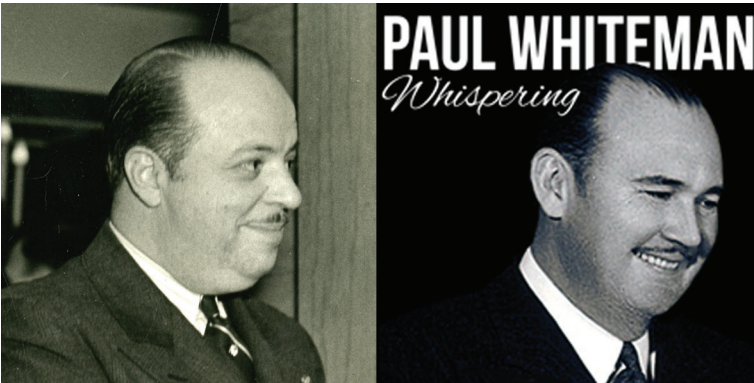




An image with information as murky as the flood waters it shows



Oops! indeed. Let's get our facts straight, shall we?



Close, but no cigar. The man on the left is trying hard to be Paul Whiteman, yet the shape of the nose, the eyebrows, the hairline just aren't right.

BE LIKE THE GIPPER: TRUST BUT VERIFY

By Krista Lewis, Archivist, CA

Trust, and/or lack of it, has been peppered throughout discussions surrounding American society, politics, and culture for a while, but I hadn't thought to make a connection to my own work or to history until recently.

How much do you trust history?

I've been immersed in history for so long that I take certain aspects, like research and sources, for granted. My experience and training tell me that history is only as good as its teller, who is only as good as their sources. I've inadvertently presented examples of this relationship in our weekly e-blast newsletter.

One was about two copies of the same photo that had conflicting information about the people and location shown. Another was about a series of newspaper articles from 1979 detailing (what turned out not to be) a shooting at the Crenlo plant.

Elsewhere, a Mayowood guide is trying to get to the bottom of the story about the Queen's bathroom at Mayowood. Chuck Mayo's book says the Queen of Nepal came to Mayowood, but newspaper accounts say otherwise.

Then there's a photo of Chuck Mayo shaking a man's hand. A past cataloger claimed the man was band leader Paul Whiteman, but a careful comparison makes the claim dubious.

History, like these examples, is messy and complicated, because people are messy and complicated.

I'm not saying we should throw up our hands in despair but rather roll up our sleeves and get to work. Don't blindly trust what you read or hear (good advice for far more than history). Pay attention to bibliographies. Seek context for cherry-picked evidence. Track down primary sources. And don't be afraid to be proven wrong.

An archivist is many things; perhaps in keeping historical resources well cared for and accessible, our most important role is making it possible for you, the public, to trust but verify.

HISTORICAL RESEARCH AT WORK

By Valerie Wassmer, Interim Executive Director/Education Director

June 21st is a big day for the History Center as we will be introducing the public to our restored smokehouse (referred to as the 'backhouse' in historic documents). The backhouse served as a multi-functional structure, which allowed for necessary adaptations and survival for the Stoppel family.

The building was completed circa 1873, roughly 15 years after the family spent their first Minnesota winter in a cave they dug out of the limestone hillside.

The careful work to physically restore the structure is finished and now the work begins to bring it back to life. An exciting collaboration including Dan Nowakowski, Chris Desisle, and I are working to create an interesting and educational representation of what the backhouse may have looked like in the 1860s and 1870s.

Unfortunately, George and Maria Stoppel left no real records behind regarding their days here at the farmstead; there are no letters, diaries, journals, or financial records to draw from. This dilemma means delving into old archives to find any references we can to the farmstead, specific buildings, or the Stoppel family, as well as larger research into how other farmsteads and buildings of the same era may have looked and functioned.

We know the structure included a unique two-story smokehouse, but other details are less clear. Census records are a valuable resource in many research projects including the Stoppel farmstead; the 1870 census record indicates that the Stoppel farm produced 600 bushels of 'Irish potatoes' and 100 bushels of 'Indian corn'.

This information confirms an 1876 newspaper article that described the backhouse as containing a cave used to store root vegetables, woodshed, corn house, workshop, and smokehouse. Census records from 1870 to 1896 also reveal multiple farmhands living onsite, most were immigrants from Germany.

Want to know more about the backhouse and see how research has shaped the staging? Join us for our event on June 21st and find out!



Restored backhouse



Chris Desisle searches the 3D collections to find appropriate artifacts for the backhouse staging

The Historic Fashion Show was a resounding success!
To all of our wonderful sponsors, donors, models, volunteers,
attendees, and, above all, Joy Melcher, we want to say

Thank You!





2025 EVENTS & PROGRAMS

Please check our website and Facebook regularly as the schedule is subject to change, olmstedhistory.com/events

- **March 27** – Gather ‘Round Lecture Series with Amy Hahn on the topic of women who made history in Olmsted County
- **March 29** – Wining About Herstory LIVE Podcast on the topic of incredible women in history
- **March 29** – Author Talk with Andrea Gilats, author of *Radical Endurance: Growing Old in an Age of Longevity*
- **April 10** – Gather ‘Round Lecture Series with Sara Grover on the topic of abolition stories connected to southeast Minnesota
- **April 17** – Gather ‘Round Lecture Series featuring University of Minnesota Forestry and Agriculture extension educators on the topic of the changing nature of agriculture and forestry and the potential impacts of climate change
- **April 2** – Mayowood Tours Begin
- **May 8** – Fiber Arts Guild 50th Anniversary Spotlight Event and Exhibit Opening
- **May 15** – Gather ‘Round Lecture Series with Sheri Brenden, author of *Break Point*, detailing how two teenagers took on the unequal system of high school athletics
- **May 17** – Fiber Arts Guild Weaving Demonstration
- **June 14** – Fiber Arts Guild Knitting Demonstration

STAFF

Valerie Wassmer
Interim Executive Director/
Education Director

Brian Boettcher
Buildings and Grounds Manager

Darla Buss
Member Services Coordinator

Chris Delisle
Assistant Education and
Event Coordinator

Molli Funk
Historic Mayowood Site Manager

Patrick Gannaway
Facilities and Grounds Coordinator

Krista Lewis
Archivist

Barb Whipple
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Historic Mayowood Site Assistant Manager

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