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NEIGHBORS

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FIELD TRIP:
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REGIONAL NEWS

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As the situation continues to change rapidly, we recommend referring to these sites for the most current information: Michigan: www.michigan.gov/coronavirus National: www.cdc.gov/COVID19 United Way of Southwest Michigan (local): for emergency updates, links to trusted sources, food distribution sites, and self-care strategies: <https://www.uwsm.org/emergency-preparedness-response>

VBCDHD will keep its website (www.vbcassdhd.org/covid-19) and Facebook (@VBCDHD) as up-to-date as possible with the latest information, including access to Michigan.gov/coronavirus data.

Health department launches new site to aid business reopening

As we begin to move through the phases of reopening and continue the stages of response to COVID-19, we know many of you have already begun or are beginning to plan for your business's next steps.

The Van Buren/Cass District Health Department has announced the launch of a dedicated webpage to assist Cass and Van Buren county businesses and organizations with reopening safely. On the webpage you will find national, local, and industry-specific safety guides; where to locate personal protective equipment (PPE); cleaning/disinfectant guides; signs

for the workplace and more. This set of guidelines and resources is offered to aid in a lower risk, thoughtful reopening. The goal is to help employers open businesses in a way that best protects employees and customers from exposure to COVID-19 and helps prevent the spread of the virus.

To see the new site, visit <https://vbcassdhd.org/guidance-for-businesses-reopening/>

CASA Annual Fundraiser Cancelled

Cass County CASA has had to take the unusual step of cancelling the Annual Dinner and Auction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Please know that we at Cass County CASA are deeply grateful for your support and commitment to children who have experienced abuse or neglect. Our mission is to change the future for children in foster care. Cass County CASA is a nonprofit agency of trained volunteers from the community who are appointed by the judge to advocate for abused and neglected children in the juvenile justice system in Cass County. For more detailed information about CASA, please visit their website at www.casscocasa.org.

The Annual Dinner and Auction is CASA's major fundraising event of the year and provides 50 percent of the annual funding. Although most businesses have been closed in the state, the issues placing children in foster care and the court system continue. Volunteers have been encouraged to set up alternative ways to visit with social workers, educators and others including texting, phone calls and video conferencing. And our expenses to support them continue.

Rather than reschedule the auction amidst all the uncertainties of today, we are appealing to your heart for your help and your support through donations.

We understand that the economy has been seriously affected by the pandemic and you may not be able to donate as much as you have in the past. However, whatever you can give will be greatly appreciated.

It is in difficult times like these that we are reminded even more how much your kindness, generosity and thoughtfulness means to the children, their families and CASA. We sincerely appreciate your support in the past and would appreciate any help you can give us now. You can donate online by visiting www.casscocasa.org/donate or you can mail your donation to Cass County CASA, 120 North Broadway, Suite 215, Cassopolis, Michigan 49031. CASA is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit so your donation may be tax deductible.

Canoe/kayak rental open at Ferrettie-Baugo Creek Park

Canoe Rental for St. Joseph County Parks was scheduled to open Saturday, May 30 for the season. In order to accommodate current COVID-19 safety precautions, rental operations will be open at Ferrettie-Baugo Creek County Park in Osceola, IN. Public rentals will be available Friday-Sunday from 11 am to 4p m. All vessels and equipment must be returned by 7 pm. The fee is \$25 for up to 3-hours per canoe or 2-person kayak. Patrons will have the opportunity to paddle on Baugo Creek as well as paddle out to Baugo Bay. Rental packages include vessel, paddles and required life jackets.

Please note that single person kayaks will not be offered at this time. A limited number of vessels are available on a first-come basis. Renters must be at least 18 years old and present a valid picture ID. Adults must accompany anyone under 18. This activity is not recommended for children 3 years of age and younger.

For the safety of guests and employees, St. Joseph County Parks will be taking the following precautions:

All rental equipment will be cleaned and sanitized between each use.

All customers must maintain 6 ft. social distancing between staff and other customers.

Rental capacity will be limited.

Public restrooms are currently closed in the park, plan accordingly.

Please note that SJCP will not open canoe/kayak rental when the creek or weather conditions are deemed unsafe. Updates will be listed on our St. Joseph County Park Facebook page or by calling 574/674-9765 during park hours.

Canoe/kayak rental at St. Patrick's County Park has been postponed at this time.

Canoe/kayak lesson at St. Patrick's County Park in June

Join certified instructor Ted Beatty for a beginner canoe and kayak lesson on Sunday, June 7, at St. Patrick's County Park in Indiana. The class is scheduled from 9 am to noon and is \$15/person, which includes all equipment.

Registration is required and space is limited. The lesson covers topics such as: safety, basic paddling strokes, getting in and out of a canoe/kayak and transporting your vessel.



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REGIONAL EVENTS CALENDAR

Editor's note: Some of the events listed on this page may have already been canceled by the pandemic ... Please check with organizers prior to the events

June 3 - Dowagiac Farm & Artisan Market, 9 am - 2 pm, 782-8212

June 6 - Porter Township Cleanup Day, 8 am - noon, American Waste, Union, 641-2375 **CANCELED**

June 13 - Diamond Lake Annual Public Meeting (all lake residents welcome),

10-11:30 am at the Yacht Club

June 19, 20 - Diamond Lake All-Lake Garage Sale, 9 - 2 pm on Friday; 9 am - noon Saturday

July 4 - Diamond Lake Association Fireworks, Firework's Island, rain/wind alternate date will be Sunday July 5

July 17, 18- Summer in the City Festival, 10 am - 5 pm, Dowagiac, 782-8212

CANCELED

July 18 - Diamond Lake Triathlon
CANCELED

July 25 -Steve's Run, 9 am - 1 pm, Dowagiac, 782-8212

August 2 - August 8 - Cass County 4H Fair, Fairgrounds, Cassopolis

August 15 - Rod & Roll Classic Auto Show, 7 am - 4 pm, Dowagiac, 782-8212

August 29 - Kee-Boon-Mein-Kaa Pow Wow, 9 am, Dowagiac, 782-8212

October 10 - Under the Harvest Moon Festival, 10 am - 4 pm, Dowagiac, 782-8212

November 13, 14 - Christmas Open House Weekend, 10 am - 5 pm, Dowagiac, 782-8212

November 28 - Small Business Saturday, 10 am - 11pm, Dowagiac, 782-8212

December 4 - Candle-light Christmas Parade, 7 - 9 pm, Dowagiac, 782-8212

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LAKE LIFE WITH JANE

Be strong and hang in there!

by **Jane Boudreau**

Hello Neighbors! I can't believe its finally June. I've been waiting for months for summer to roll around, literally. This has been a very hard time for all of us and I have no doubt that we will continue to struggle with this pandemic and all it involves for a very long time. Be strong and hang in there. My family, friends and I have been very fortunate in not catching the virus. We've all hunkered down in our respective homes.

I'm right up there with everyone else feeling sorry for myself being stuck at home day after day, but it makes me also feel a little guilty that there are people who are suffering from COVID-19, or lost someone special due to it, or perhaps out of work and living on their savings. It's a lot of mixed emotions and I think that can make tensions high. So maybe we can focus on the good things for a bit. I recently read this: Worrying makes you suffer twice. It rings pretty true for me but I worry and stress probably more than the average person. But it's something to think about.



So, this is my herb garden. The chives and oregano come back every year in abundance, and sometimes I dig a little up and mix it into flower beds just for the fragrance. I love fresh basil, isn't it insane what you have to pay for just a few stems at the grocery store? I get a few small plants in the spring and I have enough for all my recipe needs throughout the summer. I tried mint one year, I loved the smell but I'm not a fan of it in foods, or even tea. But it's super easy to grow, smells delicious, and can really take off. If I'm ever inclined to do it again I'd plant it in a pot. I like a medium size rosemary plant, usually in a pot. I've never been able to keep it going indoors after summer.



Besides all the pretty things I have popping up outside, I have a ton of invasive weeds and plants. Creeping Charlie decided to wreak havoc in my back yard a few years ago. I was told the only way to get rid of it was to dig it up. Really? It's everywhere!! I know someone who had it and they used a spade to make a little trench around it. They mixed grass seed with topsoil and sand, and over-seeded the area and the new grass crowded it out. Anyone have any other suggestions?

A few years ago I had a problem with Chinese lanterns crowding out everything in a large border of flowers along a fence. Everything I read said, "Too bad. Nothing you can do, it will always come back." And then one spring, it was gone. It has never come back. That very same area is now lily of the valley, which I absolutely did not plant. It's pretty but you have to be a tiny little fairy and hover over it to see the teeny tiny flowers. And then I read how poisonous it is, that you shouldn't even touch it without gloves. Who knew? Maybe I should stop researching my plants. And finally, I



I've missed filling bird feeders. I can only do that from spring to fall when I can commit to keeping them filled. While I'm whining about how bad nature has been to me, does anyone else have a problem with chipmunks wreaking havoc

near your feeders? They are scavengers and they burrow tunnels, many of them under our patio. There are a lot of dirty little secrets behind these lovely pictures. :-D



One of the best gardening experiences I ever had in my years working in my garden was discovering this big, fat, striped caterpillar climbing on a dill plant and nibbling away. I watched this guy, and then a few more, and although my plants were stripped of their feathery dill, it was awesome. Whenever I see a monarch, I wave and nod proudly. So anyway- plant some dill and feed a critter!

In past columns I have rambled on about food storage and expiration dates. During these past few months of staying home as much as possible, when I do suit up and go to the grocery store, I buy an alarming amount of fresh foods. And no- I'm not hoarding any one item. We just like fresh foods. So I have been looking for ways to stretch and extend the life of fresh fruits and veggies. My refrigerator can get so packed that it becomes inefficient in maintaining the right temp. Items are stacked precariously and bordering an avalanche when I'm reaching near the back of the shelf. Well fear not, you don't have to refrigerate everything, and some foods actually do better being left out. But don't think that if it's not in the refrigerator section at the grocery store, that you can leave it out as well- some fresh foods need to be kept cool to last longer. So I've have some prep and storage tips broken down according to in-season fruits and veggies we are now buying.

Strawberries - The best thing you can do to keep strawberries fresh is soak them whole in a bowl of 1 part vinegar to 3 parts cold water. 10 minutes will do it. This destroys the bacteria, or that fuzzy gray stuff on them. Rinse the berries and let drain in a colander. Place them on paper towels and let them dry a bit, then store in a tightly sealed container in your fridge. This works with other berries also.

Lemons - I've always stored my lemons in a bowl on my counter. Not good, they don't make it much more than a week. I buy quite a few of them at a time as I use them, the juice, and the peel quite a lot. So, here's what the experts say: Wash your lemons really well, dry them and then store whole in your refrigerator in a tightly sealed plastic bag. They will last almost 4 weeks.

Herbs - Hardy herbs like chives, rosemary, basil and oregano can be washed, trimmed, and placed on a damp paper towel. Roll it up jelly roll style and store in a sealed plastic bag in your refrigerator. Tender herbs like parsley, cilantro,

and thyme can be trimmed and placed upright in a mason jar filled with water. Cover the top with a damp paper towel securing with a rubber band around the jar. Refresh the water every few days.

Tomatoes/Avocados - Tomatoes do not like cool temps so it's best to store them on your counter. If they start to soften or the skin bruises, it's time to transfer them to the fridge and use them up quickly. Avocados are quite the same. Keep on your counter but once they start to over-ripen, move to the refrigerator and use them as soon as possible.

Onions - I've always kept my onions and shallots on the counter. It is however recommended to keep them in a cool, dry, dark space, in the mesh bag they came in, or you can use regular old nylons. And of course, a bowl works fine as well. I'm not one to run all over the house to gather up what I need to prepare meals, so the solution for me was to hang a hook in the stairwell going to my basement, just off the kitchen. I leave them in their netted bag and so far, so good. I think a pantry or closet can work as well.

Now, on to recipes!



I love a light and fresh seafood dish in the summer. This works for both lunch and dinner. I was curious about the shrimp and marinade and I just happened to have a pound of nice sized shrimp in the freezer. I served it over thin Thai noodles (my new love) but it would be great along side rice or pasta tossed with your favorite sauce. Keep it light to compliment the tanginess and spice of the shrimp. I took the liberty of giving it my own name.

Spicy Marinated Shrimp

Ingredients:

1/2 to 1 lb jumbo shrimp
1/3 c packed cilantro, roughly chopped
1/4 c fresh lime juice (2-3 limes)
1/4 c olive oil
1 T honey
1/2 t chili powder
canola oil for cooking
S & P

Directions:

Blend all of the ingredients except the shrimp in a food processor. Place the shrimp in a large zip lock bag and pour the marinade over. Place in refrigerator for no longer than 10 minutes or the shrimp will actually 'cook' in the acidic ingredients.

Heat 1 T canola oil in a skillet or grill pan. You can also do this on an outdoor grill. Place each piece on and grill 1 minute on each side until lightly charred.

As I've said, you can serve this in so many ways. I am looking forward to having this as an appetizer for company over a bed of lettuce, it's great at room temp. Something cool to counteract the spiciness would be a yogurt dip with cucumber slices or tortillas and a salsa verde.

Continued on next page. See:

JANE

BUSINESS & FINANCE

Summer fun - let's keep it that way!

By **Charlie Retherford**

Kemner, Iott, Benz Agency

With the arrival of summer, we find ourselves busy with outdoor activities. Whether it be boating, riding off road vehicles, camping or any other number of summer activities, it is important to know if you have coverage in the event of a loss.

Will my homeowners policy cover my watercraft?

The coverage on your homeowners policy is very limited, if there is any coverage at all, whether you are using your watercraft or storing it during the off season.

What type of coverage do I need?

You will need liability coverage. Liability protects you if your watercraft injures someone or damages someone else's property. Depending on the value and age of your watercraft, you may want coverage for physical damage. If your boat is damaged by vandalism, theft, fire, flooding or an animal, comprehensive coverage will likely apply. Collision insurance provides coverage for damage if you collide with another boat or other obstacle. You will want to ask about on-water towing – having this on your watercraft insurance

can prevent an unexpected expense. Remember to ask about your trailer and any permanently attached equipment as well as any other accessories.

Will my homeowners policy cover my ATV?

“Off roading” has become popular whether you are climbing the dunes, riding Michigan's Off Road Trails, or 4-wheeling on private property. Most homeowners policies do not provide any coverage whether you are using your ATV or storing it in the garage.

What type of coverage will I need for my ATV?

As with watercraft, you will need liability coverage to protect you should you injure someone or damage someone else's property. Also, depending on the value and age of your ATV and trailer, you may want to insure it for comprehensive and collision coverage.

What about my RV?

Once again, don't assume your automobile or homeowners insurance will cover your RV. You may have liability coverage extended from the vehicle you are using to tow your RV. Once again, whether you are using the RV or storing it, you must purchase additional coverage if you desire physical damage

coverage on the unit. Does your motor home policy cover your towed vehicle? Will your insurance cover towing your motor home, your truck and trailer, or will they leave your trailer behind and how far will they tow you?

If I keep my jet ski at my parent's lake house, may I add it to their homeowners policy?

Probably not, the person to whom the item is titled and/or registered must purchase the insurance in their name. Be honest with your insurance agent when insuring any item. Remember that you are purchasing insurance to protect you in case of a loss. Most likely you will have to provide documentation such as a title showing who owns the unit in the event of a loss. Don't put yourself in the position of being told you have no coverage if you have a liability or physical damage loss with any of your summer “toys.”

Can I get a discount for taking a safety class?

Many companies offer discounts to those who have completed an approved safety class. Whether or not a discount is available, remember to put safety first. Be sure the proper safety equipment

is being used such as life preservers when boating and helmets when riding ATV's. Driving a motor home, or pulling an RV, has more in common with driving a semi truck than you might realize. Don't let someone who is inexperienced or not properly trained operate your recreational vehicles. Never allow the use of any recreational vehicle by anyone who is tired, overheated, under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or medications as they will impair reaction time and judgment, two essential skills for safe use of any recreational vehicle.

Is there anything else I should do?

Keep your recreational vehicle in proper working order. Maintain regular tune-ups before, during and after using your vehicle for the season. Make sure your boat's gas tanks are vented and bilges are free of vapors, oil, waste and grease. Check your RV and ATV's tires, brakes, steering, and suspension. Be aware of the dangers of carbon monoxide.

Be sure and contact your insurance agent.

Don't find out after you have a loss that you have inadequate or worse yet no coverage on your recreational vehicles. Have a fun and safe summer!

JANE

Continued from previous page

This comes together very fast if you peel and devein the shrimp ahead of time. I do this unpleasant task because I save big \$\$\$\$. In any case~~~you will love it and get great rave reviews if you serve it to company. :-D



Stacked Iceberg Lettuce Salad

I was scratching my head the other day thinking that I couldn't remember the last time I had a salad with crisp iceberg lettuce and tomatoes along with some goopy dressing at least since we stopped going to restaurants awhile ago. And I always go for the salad rather than soup at restaurants as an exchange for the greasy, calorie loaded entree I plan to order. So anyway, I was pawing through the veggie bin in my fridge and all I had was baby arugula, baby spinach, and baby wilted something or other. The next time I went shopping I grabbed a nice head of iceberg and then I tried to recreate the salad of my youth before all the “super greens” came along with their fancy balsamic vinaigrette's. Is anyone else sick and tired of balsamic vinegar? So here you have my latest and greatest summer salad.

Ingredients:

- 1 head of iceberg lettuce
- 4 stalks of celery, washed and chopped in 1/2 pieces
- 8 radishes, thinly sliced

- 6 oz feta cheese crumbles
- 3 oz chopped pancetta (or bacon)
- 1/2 c mayonnaise
- 1/2 c sour cream
- 1 t Worcestershire sauce
- 1 garlic clove, finely chopped
- 2 T fresh lemon juice
- S&P to taste

Directions:

Prepare salad dressing, cover and refrigerate. In a small skillet, sauté pancetta. Drain and set aside.

Assemble salad. Remove and lose outer leaves of lettuce. Slice the lettuce widthwise in 1/2 in pieces. Do this until you have 8 slices. You don't have to be perfect, just try to keep the pieces together.

To assemble, place one slice of lettuce on each of four plates. Top with a small amount of the radishes, celery, and pancetta. Drizzle a bit of the dressing over and squeeze a lemon. Top with the last 4 slices and repeat with the veggies, meat and dressing. Serves 4

*You may want to double the dressing. It will stay fresh in your fridge for about 5 days and is perfect for sandwiches, burgers, or another salad if you are still craving that crisp, watery good stuff!

I know, this looks like one full plate and it is, but trust me, this is just one simple recipe that I wanted to pass on and it is for the Parsley Glazed Carrots. Serve it along with a big juicy steak off the grill and some rice flecked with carrots and peas--another favorite from my childhood. I came across this recipe last year around Easter, we all loved it and then tonight I wanted to make it again and had to pull the ingredients out of my head.

I cook fresh veggies every single night. It sounds time consuming but you can easily do it while you are at the stove working on the other parts of your meal. The only veggies I don't buy fresh are peas (I get them frozen). I don't have the patience to mess with them. I think that jazzing up your veggies makes them more tasty and you tend to add more to your plate, a great trick to get those nutrients. So, very simply:

Parsley Glazed Carrots

Ingredients:

- 4 cups carrots (sliced in half and then cut lengthwise very thinly into long spears)
- S & P to taste
- 1/2 t sugar

- 1/4 cup water
- 2 T fresh lemon juice
- 2 T butter
- 2 T fresh parsley, chopped

Directions:

Add all ingredients except the butter and parsley to a sauce pan or skillet with a tightly fitted lid and cook over moderately high heat for approximately 7-10 minutes. Toss frequently in the last 3 minutes prevent burning. Remove from heat when they are lightly charred and tender. Toss with the butter and sprinkle with parsley. Serves 4-6.

The beauty of this recipe is that the small amount of sugar caramelizes the carrots, and the bit of charring makes for a crispness and earthiness that is softened by the butter. I hope you try this as a side dish. It really is delicious.

I've also learned to love frozen peas and carrots. I throw them in everything. I made egg salad last week and thawed some to add to the mix. It was a really nice difference and added some crunch. I served it over a bed of iceberg lettuce. For the record, my salad includes chopped, boiled eggs, mayonnaise, a small amount of chopped shallot, celery, garlic and onion powder to taste. NO salt, you'd be surprised how much mayo has.

It took me a long time to try a fish taco but once I did I was sold. I order them at restaurants whenever I see them, and if it's an outdoor dining place, it doesn't get any better than that. I am also loving making them, and I usually serve them buffet style, which takes away a lot of extra work. I had something similar to these in San Diego a few years ago and I hope you give my recipe a shot. I took the best ingredients and methods from a few good experiences. Don't let the list of ingredients daunt you, nor the procedures. At the end I give some tips on how to prepare part of it ahead of time. As always, I stress that you line up all of your ingredients before you start anything! If anything needs to be chopped up, get that done next. Then get creating!!!

Blackened Fish Tacos with Avocado-Cilantro Sauce

This is a somewhat spicy dish, but the heat is mellowed out by the slaw and creamy avocado dressing.

Ingredients:

- 1.5 lbs. tilapia or cod fillets

- 1 1/2 t smoked paprika
- 1 t garlic powder
- 1 t dried oregano
- 1 t onion powder
- 1/2 t cumin
- 1/2 t salt
- 1/2 t brown sugar
- 1/4 t cayenne pepper
- 2 T veggie oil
- 12 corn tortillas
- ***For the slaw:
- 1/2 red cabbage, sliced thin
- 1/4 green cabbage, sliced thin
- 1/2 medium sweet onion
- 1/2 c chopped cilantro
- Juice of 1 lime
- ***For the avocado-cilantro sauce:
- 1/2 c sour cream
- 1 ripe avocado, peeled and pitted
- 1/4 c cilantro
- 1 jalapeno, seeded and chopped
- Salt to taste

Directions:

In a small bowl mix together all of the spices and gently pat into both sides of the fish

Combine all of the avocado-cilantro sauce in a food processor or blender until well combined.

Prepare the cabbage slaw.

Use the veggie oil to lightly coat your grill or grill pan. Cook the fillets over high but not direct heat, 4 minute per side. This can also be done in a heavy skillet on your stove. Remove the fish from the heat and if desired, warm the tortillas for 30 minutes on each side.

Gently break up the fish into large chunks. Stack the tortillas in twos. Distribute the fish evenly between the 6 sets of tortillas and top with the slaw and sauce. Serves 4-6

This recipe is not as busy as it sounds. I make my sauce and slaw the day before and keep it refrigerated. The spice mix can be made ahead, in fact, you might want to double or triple the ingredients as it makes a tasty seasoning for all types of fish and meats.

I hope your month has started off great. Sunshine and fresh air can do that. Be safe and I'll see ya next month!

Jane Boudreau is a writer and blogger with homes in Chicago, on Diamond Lake, and in North Carolina. All photos are Jane's, please contact her for permission to use. You can reach her at blndy9@yahoo.com

LOCAL REAL ESTATE

Restrictions cut into housing sales

The shelter-in-place restrictions and Realtors not being able to show or list properties forced the overall number of houses sales to fall 36 percent when compared to April 2019 in Cass County (36 vs. 57). Waterfront houses dropped 56 percent (4 vs. 9). Non-waterfront home sales decreased 33 percent (32 vs. 48).

Year-to-date, the overall number of houses sold was down 5 percent (145 vs. 153). Waterfront home sales were up 67 percent (35 vs. 21). Non-waterfront home sales declined 17 percent (110 vs. 132).

The overall average selling price in April 2020 was up less than 1 percent over 2019 (\$193,501 vs. \$191,768). The overall median selling price in April at \$136,250 dropped 15 percent from the \$160,000 median price in April 2019.

The average selling price for waterfront homes soared 107 percent to \$560,000 from \$270,111 in April 2019. The median selling price for waterfront homes sky-rocketed 133 percent (\$605,000 vs. \$260,000).

The average selling price for non-waterfront homes in April decreased 17 percent to \$147,689 from \$177,078 in April 2019. The median selling price fell 7 percent to \$128,500 from \$137,500 in April 2019.

The median price is the price at which 50 percent of the homes sold were above that price, and 50 percent were below.

In Cass County, there were two houses that were bank-owned or foreclosed as a part of all closed transactions

in April or six percent of the total houses sold. The highest percentage in April previously was 21 percent in 2015.

For comparison, the number of bank-owned or foreclosed homes as a percentage of all transactions in Allegan, Berrien, Cass, and the westerly 2/3 of Van Buren Counties was 6 percent in April up from 5 percent in March. The previous lowest percentage was 3 percent in April 2019. The highest percentage in April was 54 percent in 2009.

The full effects of Stay-At-Home and REALTORS not being able to show or list houses during the month of April took a toll on the overall SWMI housing market. The number of houses sold, and the total dollar volume of sales dropped 35 and 34 percent, respectively.

After five years of steady gains in the number of houses sold in April above 224 houses, this past month, there were only 194 houses sold. In April 2019, there were 297 houses sold, which was the peak year in our year-over-year comparison back to 2006.

Year-to-date, the number of houses sold fell to 809 from 941 sold in April 2019, also the peak number in the year-over-year comparison. The last time sales were at this level was in April 2015.

The homes that sold had the highest average and median selling prices for the month of April and year-to-date since 2006.

The average selling price in April 2020 was \$220,208 compared to \$218,607 in April 2019, up less than 1 percent. Year-to-date, the average selling price was up 6 percent (\$221,437 vs. \$209,837).

The median selling price in April 2020 increased 9 percent to \$186,000 from \$170,000 in April 2019. Year-to-date, the median selling price jumped 14 percent (\$177,000 vs. \$155,000).

The median price is the price at which 50 percent of the homes sold were above that price, and 50 percent were below.

Comparing April to March, the number of houses sold fell 20 percent (194 vs. 244). The average selling price was down less than 1 percent (\$220,208 vs. \$221,734). The median selling price was up by 3 percent (\$186,000 vs. \$180,000).

With fewer houses sold even at record setting prices, the total dollar volume fell 34 percent in April (\$42,720,427 vs. \$64,926,322). The year-to-date total dollar volume was up down 9 percent (\$179,142,974 vs. \$197,456,934).

The inventory of houses for sale declined 25 percent from April 2019 (1115 vs. 1484). This level gave the market a 4.5-months supply of houses for buyers. For comparison, in April 2009, there were 3218 houses for sale.

The number of bank-owned or foreclosed homes as a percentage of all transactions was 6 percent in April up from 5 percent in March. The previous lowest percentage was 3 percent in April 2019. The highest percentage in April was 54 percent in 2009.

Locally, the mortgage rate was 3.213 down from 3.635 in March. Last year in April, the rate was 4.320. Nationally, the Freddie Mac mortgage rate in April was 3.23 down slightly from 3.5 in March for a 30-year conventional mortgage.

This data reflects home sales across Allegan, Berrien, Cass, and the westerly 2/3 of Van Buren counties and should not be used to determine the market value of any individual property. If you want to know the market value of your property, please contact your local REALTOR®.

When Selling a Home...

NAR's 2020 Realtors® and Sustainability report recently concluded that many families are currently spending more time at home, and some are taking on improvement projects involving sustainable features. Some buyers are also deciding to purchase homes with environmentally-friendly components. In both instances, these households look to either reduce utility costs or increase personal comfort within their home.

The home features clients listed as very important to their agent or broker included a comfortable living space; prox-

imity to frequently visited places; and windows, doors, and siding. Knowing that these features are important to buyers, discuss with your Realtor® how to take advantage of what your home offers and use to market your home against competitive properties.

When Buying a Home...

There is always a lot to consider when making the leap from apartment dweller to first-time homebuyer. Even during the best of times, the process can seem overwhelming. While typical home shopping methods may not be possible right now due to COVID-19 safety concerns, there are still responsible ways to pursue your dream of homeownership.

Many of the key steps are still the same, but the approach may be different. The first step is to figure out what you can afford. Your safe approach now is to interview Realtors® and lenders over the phone and electronically complete forms that are needed.

The second step - create a list of must haves. While you may have started this list by viewing homes, now you should have a list that contains everything "from the number of bedrooms and bathrooms to finite details like large windows or a big open concept floor plan". You'll also need to consider how close you want to be to good schools, the transit system, and other amenities. Decide which of these items are non-negotiable and share that information with your REALTOR®.

Many listings have virtual tours that are a great way for you to stay safe but get a better feel for the homes they are interested in and eliminate those that don't meet your needs.

Substituting these safe alternatives within the traditional home-buying process, you don't have to let COVID 19 stop you from transitioning from apartment dweller to homeowner.

To view properties that are for sale in your local area, go to www.swmar.com and click on "Property Search". The Southwestern Michigan Association of REALTORS®, Inc. is a professional trade association for real estate professionals who are members of the National Association of REALTORS®, and ancillary service providers for the real estate industry in Allegan, Berrien, Cass, and Van Buren Counties. The Association can be contacted at 269-983-6375 or through their website at www.swmar.com.



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What is it?

This item, which was used from the period around 1820, is definately a trap -
BUT what kind of an animal was it designed for.
What is it?

ANSWER ON PAGE 17 OF THIS MONTH'S
NEIGHBORS



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OUR CHILDREN

Everyday learning

by **SANDY FLEMING**

This year, more than ever, it will be important to keep the kids’ brains active throughout the entire summer. Over the course of the normal summer break, kids usually slide backward a bit with their learning. Teachers expect this and they typically plan several weeks’ worth of review during the first few months of the school year. It’s often October before students are ready to move on to new material.

However, instead of two and a half to three months of summer vacation, this year kids will have been out of class for nearly six months by the time the 2020-21 school year rolls around. And that is given that we get to start normally in the fall with full schedules. That is far from assured! We’ll all need to watch local districts as they decide how and when the school year will start, and chances are very good that it will involve some major modifications to keep everyone safe.

Some studies have shown that kids lost approximately 30 percent of their instructional time during this closure. Add that to the usual “summer slide” that plagues many students, and the picture is pretty stark. Some youngsters may be half a year or more behind in learning by the time school resumes. How in the world can we make up for lost time?

A partial answer lies in what the kids do in the coming weeks and months. It will be more important this year than ever before that children and teens keep “doing learning” all summer long. It feels almost like sacrilege, but the stakes are too high to ignore. Kids who keep moving forward with learning these next few months will be far better off educationally speaking than those who spend the summer playing video games and playing. It’s not likely to be a complete substitute for classroom time, but it can help mitigate at least some of the damage.

And orchestrating this effort is going to lie in the hands of parents and caregivers. The question becomes, how can you manage keeping kids’ brains active and engaged while seeing to your own work and household responsibilities? It is possible, and it’s actually in keeping with a whole philosophy of education: lifelong learning. You have loads of tools at your disposal. All you need is to make a decision and have the force of will to carry it out. Here’s how to get started!

Change Your Focus

Somewhere along the way, we as a society began to equate learning with grades and scores. That needs to change. Learning, gathering up new knowledge in such a way that it enriches our lives, is a life-long pursuit and it happens almost by magic when we are engaged and working on things, trying to reach goals, and so forth.

THAT’s the situation we need to come back to. Learning for learning’s sake is an important skill, and it

opens doors for the rest of your life if you can just “learn how to learn.” It puts responsibility squarely on each individual’s shoulders, which is where it belongs, rather than on a secession of teachers that blur together.

So your job becomes exciting your kids about the vast amount of knowledge and skill that is out there for the grabbing. That’s a whole lot more fun than making sure they score 100% on the next quiz. Read, Read, Read The single most important thing you can do for your kids this summer is to demand lots and lots of reading, and offer them a wide array of different types of reading. Some reading for fun, some reading for learning, some reading to get information, some reading to find out what other people think, and some reading where the author is just playing with words and sharing for sheer enjoyment.

Have a family read-aloud time. If your kids are comfortable, they can even help with the reading. Use this time of family togetherness to introduce your kids to books they may not pick up on their own. Try biographies, mysteries, poetry, and all the other genres. It’s ok to start a book to get people intrigued, then leave the book lay where someone will pick it up. It’s ok to start a book and then change your mind if it wasn’t what you wanted right then. And it’s ok to read the silly stories that might seem “babyish” to older kids. Just read!

When you read aloud, make the activity your own. Use the crazy voices, read with expression, get loud and get quiet, read fast and read slowly. Your engagement will almost guarantee that the kids will stay engaged, as well.

You also don’t have to read straight through. It’s fine to stop and chat about what you read, ask questions to make sure the kids understood what was in the text, and even ask them questions about details of the story or the pictures. There are so many things you can do before, during, and after your reading time that will enrich the experience for everyone! Try previewing the book by making a picture about a key event that is alluded to in the title. Try making a prediction about the story before you read. Try playing a scavenger hunt while you read. Try responding to the book in some tangible way, like doing a skit or a book review, after the story is over. Think of books that might be similar in some way to read next.

Have kids read on their own, as well. Many families have good luck with making reading a part of the regular chore list. Kids keep a log of what book they are reading and the time and amount of pages they’ve covered. Again, predicting what the story might hold, and doing some kind of follow up activity is crucial to staying engaged. Make sure that kids have lots of ways to respond, like writing a newspaper about the main event in the book or designing a book cover.

Take Math Out of Class

Numbers are involved in nearly everything we do. Don’t try to isolate math learning to a specific time of day or a particular workbook, but instead work to see math concepts in the world around you. There are some obvious answers, like cooking or measurement or counting or planning a party or using money. There are also some not-so-obvious avenues, as well, such as looking for geometric shapes, finding examples of symmetry, going on a treasure hunt to find places where numbers intersect with our lives, and more. Try creating some math trivia questions, such as how many drawers are in our house or what is the area of the windows in the living room?

Cooking is another great math opportunity. Find some great dessert recipes from other cultures to try out this summer. Use measuring terms and practice halving or doubling the recipe. No, you don’t need to really MAKE a quadruple batch, but how much of each ingredient would be involved if you did? If the cookies need 12 minutes per batch to bake, and there are 4 batches, what time will it be when they finish?

Try math games, as well. You can play War, for example, by having each person turn over two cards instead of one and multiplying them. The highest total gets to keep all four cards. Who can get the entire deck first?

Math magic is another entire area to explore. There are tons of math magic tricks available for the learning, and each works on some amazing math principles that will help your child gain foundational understanding about how numbers work.

Science and Social Studies

These two subjects are the easiest to keep moving in the family setting. All you need to do is notice the world around you, both physically, and in current affairs. Keep the basics in mind, like how to do the scientific method (make an observation, ask a question, form a hypothesis, make a prediction, test the prediction, then report your results and start all over again!). Scour the internet and books for ideas about science experiments and demonstrations that will intrigue the kids. Find kid-appropriate articles about current affairs to share. Talk as a family about what you believe and why (be sure to allow the kids to form their own beliefs and support themselves as well). Pick another country and learn about its culture. And the list goes on and on.

The main thing to keep in mind is that science and social studies topics are great vehicles to help children learn self-expression, critical thinking, research skills, organization, and more. Be sure that as you “do” these subjects that you ask for summaries and presentations of learning. Use a wide variety of formats, and you’ll be covering all of these bases, as well.

Putting Pen to Paper

Don’t neglect written expression

while we’re out of school. Writing is just as important as reading and math, and it can also get just as rusty. Just like you insist that kids use their reading and math skills daily, make sure they also write each and every day.

One easy place to focus is on writing a sound paragraph. Have kids write a paragraph each day, and increase your requirements for what constitutes a paragraph (4 sentences all the way up to 7-10 sentences). Watch for topic sentences, great supporting details, logical transitions and connections, and a solid closing sentence.

Kids can write journals, stories, reports, directions, poems, and more. Challenge them to write nonstop for 5 to 15 minutes. Let them do a proof-reading scavenger hunt through someone else’s poorly written prose. Try using only written communication all day long. Have them request permission for special activities by making a logical case in writing.

What About Kids Who Have Learning Challenges?

These kids are probably the most at risk of having educational setbacks due to the prolonged school closure, so you’ll want to be especially intentional about helping them move forward. It would be a really good idea to plan some specific activities to help with reading, math, and writing at their level. The internet has a great number of resources that will help your child gain skills in these areas, or you can talk to a professional educator to get ideas that are appropriate and individualized for your child’s specific needs.

Now Keep Going!

If you do it right, learning activities will enrich your student’s summer rather than being burdensome. The key is to help them find reasons to WANT to learn (even if they are artificial rewards, like including learning tasks in the daily chores or offering prizes for accomplishing goals), and then to use their interests to guide your efforts. Try playing lots of games and having competitions with themselves or with others (make sure everyone has an even chance of being the winner!). Try incorporating puzzles and mysteries into the activities. Kids will eat that up!

The more your child uses his or her brain, the less of a summer slide will be apparent when we do finally get back to school. You have the power to make sure your kids are not left behind, even during these difficult times. It’s up to you to make up your mind and make it happen.

Sandy Fleming is an educational consultant, writer and tutor living in Edwardsburg. If you need some resources and ideas to keep kids’ brains active this summer, check out the Active Minds group on Facebook! (<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1048952175489109/>)

FIELD TRIP



Delivering Meals on Wheels with the COA



It started in the early days of the pandemic when Kelli Casey, the director of community development at the Cass COA, emailed me a message to let me know about the essential services the COA is continuing to provide for seniors throughout the community during the COVID-19 Stay home, Stay Safe executive order. Beginning, March 17, it said, the COA closed both of its facilities to the public. At that time, they began offering Five Free Frozen meals to seniors 60+ to either be picked up curbside or delivered to their homes in addition to the regular Meals on Wheels deliveries. In just three weeks, the COA had delivered over 2,800 meals at little or no cost to area seniors. On April 13, they announced

that they would be providing another round of Five Free Frozen meals; including those who have previously received.

Next thing I knew I was at the COA where a few well-scrubbed, masked and sanitized employees were making and packing meals that we packed into a car and I was off with COA CEO Marty Heirty delivering meals around Cass ...

In all, it was a good morning ... Marty is a nice guy, the people working at COA were friendly and helpful and the recipients were great (and grateful).

For more information on the COA or Meals on Wheels, call (269) 445-8110 or visit the website CASSCOA.ORG.



Participants enrolled in the program will receive phone calls each weekday at a scheduled time as a daily check-in and provide friendly conversation. Any concerns would be referred to the participant's emergency contact or other local agencies if needed.

If you, a family member, or a friend is interested in the COA's C.A.R.E. program, please call (269) 445-8110. C.A.R.E. is only a phone call away.



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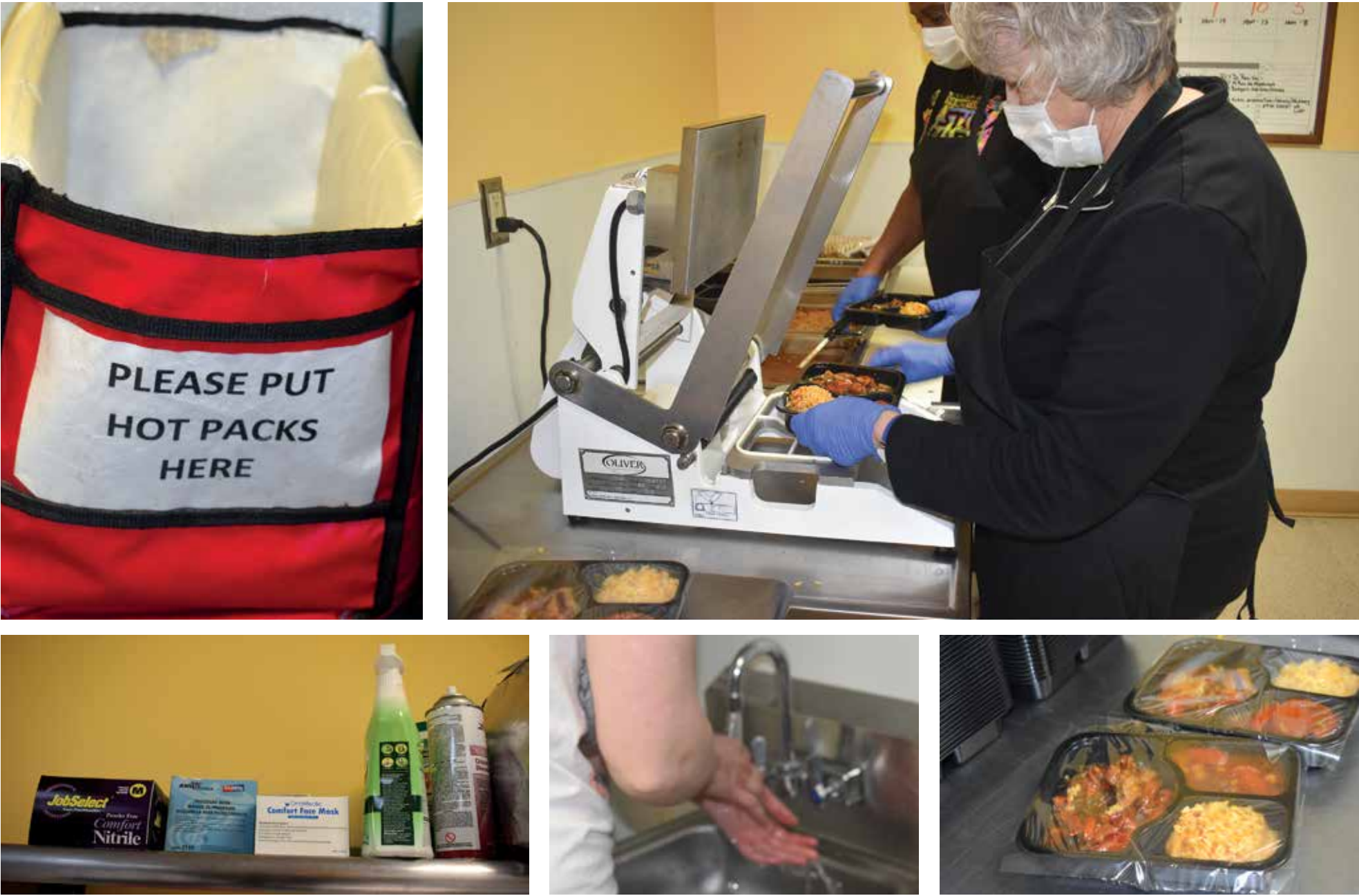
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HISTORIC POSTCARDS

Historic postcards depict rich scenes of our area’s past

In this issue of Neighbors, Jerdon Real Estate of Dowagiac, owned by Floyd Jerdon and his son Tom, has provided antique postcards of a few of the many lakes in our area.

Floyd and his wife Donna started collecting post cards more than 20 years ago, and since Jerdon Real Estate specializes in marketing lake property, it was a natural fit that Floyd’s interest be directed to the lake cards. The collection now numbers many thousands.

Jerdon has recently used many of



his postcards featuring the Sister Lakes area in a book written by RL Rasmussen. The book, which retails for \$19.99, is in its second printing by the publisher, Arcadia Publishing. Among other places, the book may be purchased at the Jerdon Real Estate

office on M-62 West, and at Whistlestop Gifts, which is operated by the Dowagiac Chamber of Commerce. For more information or to get a copy of Jerdon’s book, visit the website: www.arcadiapublishing.com In this edition of Neighbors we

have selected postcards showing images of various places around Cass County. In future issues, we will couple additional cards from one or more of the area’s lakes with views of nearby communities, lakes and countryside.

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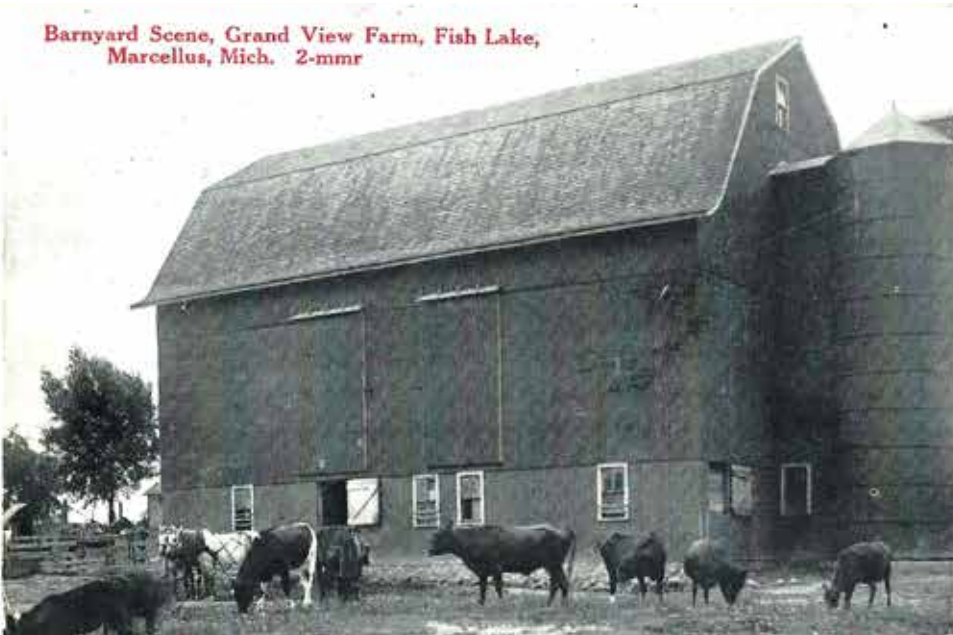
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NATURE NOTES

Spectacular spring birds

Provided by Cass District Library
Local History Branch

Two bald eagles are nesting near the banks of the Saint Joseph River, at Berrien Hills Golf Course in St. Joseph Township. The two adults and nest were photographed on May 8, 2020 by Kirsten Vanderberg of St. Joseph. Vanderberg was able to view the nest from Gold View Road. The adult pair of eagles in Vanderbergs photo are a pair bond for life and will likely reuse the nesting site for years, building a new nest atop the old one.

Bald eagles lay two eggs on average on the massive nest made out of branches, sticks, and other plant material. It is lined with moss, old corn stalks, animal hair, feathers and other materials.

In Michigan young eaglets have been found in nests from April through July. The young eagles of 2020 will stay with the parents until fall, then go out on their own. The young eagles will not acquire white heads and tails until four years have passed.

This year is the second year in a row in which eagles have nested at this site. There are now four or five known bald eagle nests in Berrien County, but this is the most visible. The other nests are located in remote locations along the St. Joseph and Paw Paw Rivers.

I have been told that the eagle nest can be viewed from the south end of Golf View Road. I would strongly encourage those who wish to view the nest to respect private property, and keep your distance from the eagle nest.

While bald eagles are not a Federally Endangered Species, they are still protected by law. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service states on their website: "Bald and golden eagles are still protected by multiple federal laws, such as the Eagle Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, the Lacey Act, and other state and municipal protections. Eagles, their feathers and parts, nests, nest trees, and winter/nighttime roosts are all protected by federal laws."

The male painted bunting truly looks as if it was designed by an artist with its red underside, green back, and blue head. One of these colorful songbirds turned up at the feeders of David Ferris, of Coloma, from May 3 to 6, seen by dozens of bird-watchers from at least three states.

The range of the painted bunting during the breeding season is Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, east to Arkansas and Louisiana, and another disjunct population in coastal South Carolina south along the Atlantic Coast to central Florida.

This painted bunting represents the fourth record of the species in Berrien County since 1966, all of them adult males. The first record of the species in Michigan was an adult male seen on April 30, 1966 in Benton Harbor. The second record for the county was found on May 19, 2007 near New Troy, and the third was seen alive at a feeder near Berrien Center from November 12-13, 2010, and picked up dead two days later, and is now a study skin at University of Michigan's Museum of Zoology.

The painted bunting has occurred about 35 times in the state, roughly half of the records have occurred in the Lower Peninsula. There are no other records of the painted bunting in the southwestern Lower Peninsula outside Berrien County.

Another good find was a male western tanager that turned up on the evening of May 8 at the feeders of Tom and Gretchen Lenz of St. Joseph.

The western tanager male is quite



Above: Two adult bald eagles at nest May 2, 2020, at Berrien Hills Golf Course, St. Joseph Township. Taken from Golf View Road by Kirsten Vanderberg of St. Joseph. Left and below left, perhaps the most colorful of the North American songbirds is the male painted bunting, of which one was seen May 3-6 at the feeders of David Ferris of Coloma. Photo by David Ferris. Right: Male Baltimore oriole feeds on an orange strategically placed by Hans Schroeder of St. Joseph. Below center: Male rose-breasted grosbeak on April 28 at Royalton Township feeder of Lynn Basselman. Bottom right: A colorful male western tanager turned up May 8, 2020 at the feeders of Tom and Gretchen Lenz of St. Joseph. Gretchen Lenz.



impressive with its red face, yellow body, black wings with white wing-stripes. In winter the plumage turns a yellow-green.

Western tanagers nest in western North America from the Alaskan panhandle, south to southern California and east through Saskatchewan, Wyoming, Colorado and New Mexico. Western tanager winter in Mexico and Central America.

Michigan has nearly 50 records of the western tanager from 1989 to the present. The Lenz record is the third for Berrien County, the previous two were a winter male from December 2002 to January 2003 at a feeder in Berrien Township, and a male on May 26, 2003 in Lincoln Township.

Other Southwest Michigan records of Western Tanager include one on July 24, 2004 in Van Buren County and single birds in 2002 and 2019, from Kalamazoo County.

The Baltimore oriole and rose-breasted grosbeak are two of the most anticipated long distant migrants to return to Southwest Michigan. Both of these song-

birds arrived back in the region after April 20 but were not commonly seen until the last two days of April.

Hans Schroeder of St. Joseph photographed a male Baltimore oriole on April 29 as it took in much needed calories from an orange, placed out at his bird feeding station.

Baltimore orioles wintering grounds are tropical forests of Mexico, south through northern South America. By the time orioles arrive back on their nesting grounds they are in dire need of energy. An easy way to help out orioles is to slice an orange and skew it to a small branch. There are many ideas for making oriole feeders on the internet.

By mid-April the first migrants begin to arrive back in Michigan, and immediately begin the nesting process.

The Baltimore oriole constructs a hanging nest from a tree branch made out of plant fibers and lines with grass and animal hair. Elm, oak and birch are the favored nesting trees of the oriole in Michigan. While the male oriole brings some nest material to the site, the nest is

weaved together by the female.

By late June or July adults and juvenile orioles will have vacated the nesting area.

Fall migration begins in mid-August and September. Most orioles depart Southwest Michigan by mid-September.

On April 28, Lynn Basselman of Royalton Township photographed a male rose-breasted grosbeak at her feeder.

Like the Baltimore oriole, the grosbeak is a long-distance migrant, with the first individuals arriving back in Southwest Michigan by April 24, becoming common about a week later.

While the rose-breasted grosbeak is found throughout Michigan during the summer months it is most abundant in the southern portion of the state. Nesting starts in May, and young usually leave the nest by July.

Both the Baltimore oriole and rose-breasted grosbeak visit feeding stations upon returning to Michigan in the spring. As the season progresses both species depend less on feeding stations and rely more on insects for food.

LOCAL HISTORY

Construction of the 1898 courthouse

Provided by **Jon Wuepper**,
Local History Branch Manager
Cass District Library

Last month I featured lost details on the 1841 Cass County Courthouse move from its original site at the northeast corner of Broadway Street to West State Street, in order to make room for the construction of the 1898 Courthouse.

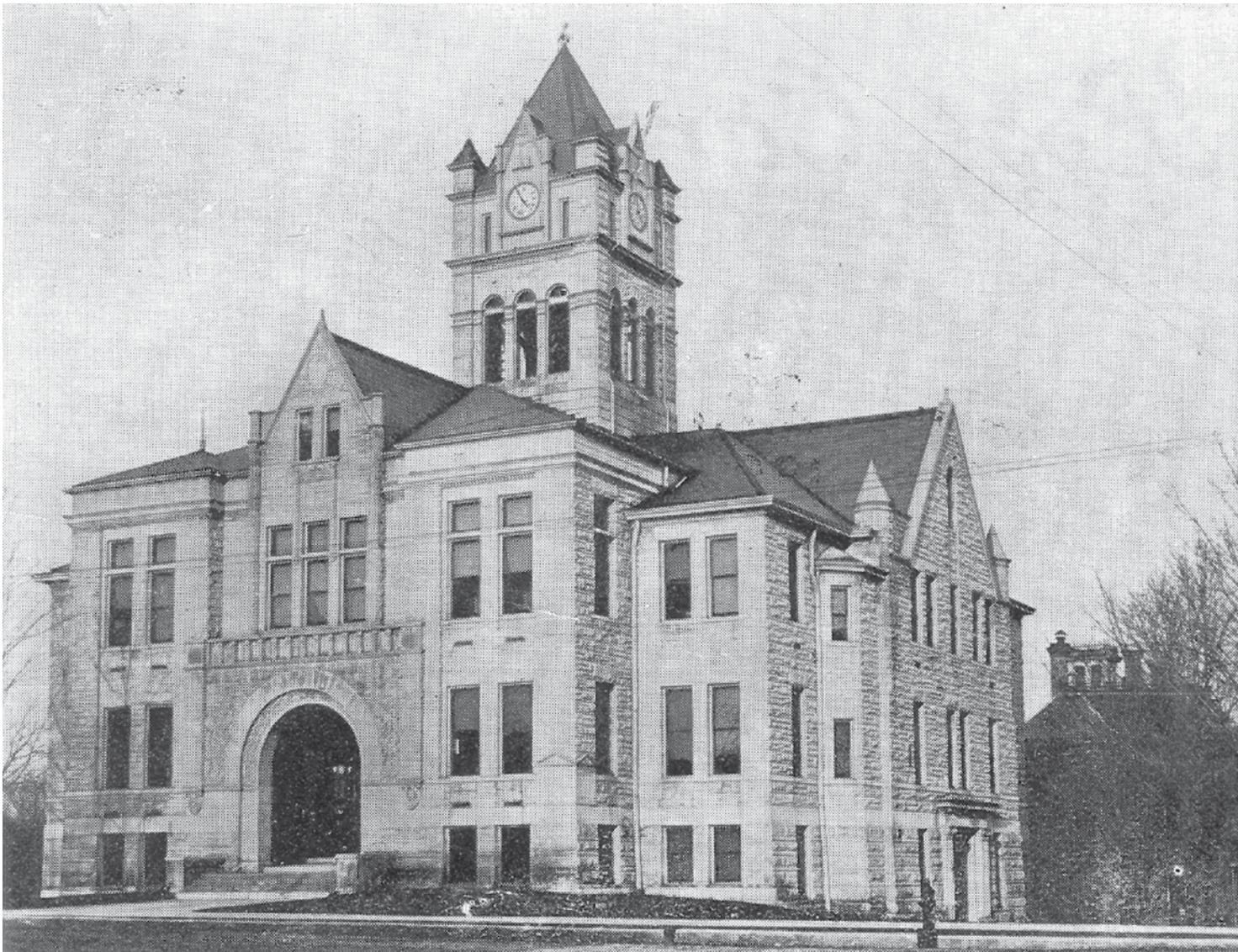
This month I'd like to share some details about the construction of the 1898 Courthouse, which took nearly 18 months from the beginning of the construction project to the end in early 1900.

Just a day or two after the removal of the 1841 Courthouse from northeast corner of Broadway and State Streets, work began on the new courthouse. In late May it was reported that work crews were leveling off the lot on which the new building would sit. The dirt taken off the site was used to widen O'Keefe Street near the Michigan Central Railroad Depot.

Ground was broken for the new basement on July 27, 1898, as reported by the Vigilant. They further reported: The ground necessary for building purposes will be fenced in, to keep out intruders and loafers."

The architectural firm of Rush Bowman and Rush of Grand Rapids submitted plans for the new courthouse, and was accepted by the Board of Supervisors in May, the fee not reported in the local papers.

The Cassopolis Vigilant, July 14, 1898 edition reported: "The original plan



1898 Cass County Courthouse, taken in early to mid-20th Century. Credit Cass District Library

was for a field stone foundation wall, but the board voted to adopt cut stone

instead, at an additional cost of \$885."

The architects revised the plans which included the cut stone foundation, but there was a dispute with the contractors of Biggerstaff & Atkins of Kalamazoo.

An agreement was eventually settled

upon that summer and the stone, which had come from the Beford Quarry Company in southern Indiana, was delivered in August with the first layer of stones put in place during the last week of the month.

To be continued ...



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THE LAST WORD

Sailing through Typhoon Pandemic

The sleepy morning dawned spectacularly that morning, the rising sun illuminating the homes on the west side and turning them to a brilliant, glowing orange reflecting off the quiet, still water between them and me as I sat sipping my coffee while unseen fish dotted the tableau by opportunistically gobbling surface-swimming bugs and spreading widening rings of barely disturbed water.

The lake was unusually empty, oddly devoid of even the slow-moving morning fishermen who sometimes ghost by during my daily (albeit now physician-restricted) caffeine ritual. A couple diffused, unthreatening clouds floated over the serene scene to the southwest, dull smudges of bright white against the brilliant blue of the early sky.

There were no slashing contrails of bright-white jet exhaust trails, no raucous roars from distant passing planes or the ubiquitous weekend lawn mowers and power washers and jet skis likely to disturb even the lazy mayflies hanging like a damp sheet waiting for the sun's warmth to air dry on a clothesline.

I took a deep breath, savoring the rare calm while it lasted. I knew the lake was soon to wake, and too soon the holiday weekend would explode in shattering, noisy confusion as throngs of pandemic-numbed revelers sought to escape the new norm of the dour, wearisome, self-quarantine lockdown during the year of coronaphobia.

My yet-rigged sailboats silently beckoned, begging attention and craving activity like a bored, sugar-buzzed toddler streaking after a litter of puppies

frolics in dew-damp morning grass.

I took another bite of my coffee, chewing the undigested memories of last night's conversations over which neighbors we expected to violate self-distancing recommendations and whether their brazen breakouts would be the result of heartfelt political dissention, unadvised youthful bravado or simple rebelliousness against the crushing ennui of the inaction of practical patience.

I sucked in the serenity while it lasted and shivered slightly as I thought about the meaning of this holiday. Memorial Day. My slow-to-waken brain picked at jumbled Memorial Day memories of the past; sun-drenched early season cookouts, the roar of a field of whirling Indy cars streaking past checkered flags, the gravity of parent-mandated visits to cemeteries where my brothers and I would stand quietly at the brightly colored, over-flowered graves of never-met and long-passed uncles and cousins and other family and friends who, we were told, had given their lives in one war or another.

The irony of those memories contrasted and congealed in frightening clarity as I considered the new, fear-fueled normal and wondered if it is more noble to die in a blaze of fire and bombs in some far-away war as opposed to dying at home as the result of an illness caused by a virus that had maybe been passed innocently by a passerby in a too-crowded grocery store or by someone who may have forgotten to substitute the once expected handshake for a fist or elbow bump, or as the result of an ill-advised visit to a criminally crowded activity.

Stupid question I concluded in a rare

flash of epistemological insight ... knowing that it doesn't really matter whether the blue you recognize on the mailbox down the road is exactly the same blue I see when I pick up the day's mail.

Blue is blue is blue, and your blue may not be the same as my blue, but we both name it blue.

So it's blue, I knew.

A fish jumped off the corner of my vision, and its splash took a long while to wash away the deep, dark thoughts of today's terrifying pandemic and clean away the memories of too-many recent and long-ago deaths in obscure or historic battles. A swarm of hundreds of frenzied minnows streamed by, oblivious to the panic of pandemic and to the memories and honors bestowed on dead soldiers, indifferent to cancellations and precautions and extended executive orders, aware only of their own blinding fear as they swirled en masse away from the gaping maw of a mauling bass that was hoping for a feast of fins and gills in the sun-warmed shallows of an early holiday morning.

My coffee'd gone cold, and as I cooked breakfast I remembered plans of grilling chicken and hot dogs and something vaguely resembling beef under the promised warm sun of the holiday afternoon. Maybe later I'll take the dog for a walk, I considered, or my wife and I can go for a ride around the lake just for something to do that doesn't involve news and gloom and boredom.

The sun climbed higher, and a glint flashed and reflected off the stainless steel spreader bar half way up my mast. I refilled my cup with steaming, morning joy poured atop the dregs of grounds (and

what looked to be at least one drowned gnat), and walked out onto the deck to once again look at my boat.

During this dumb distraction, do I even remember how to run the sheet through the tangle of tackle and blocks? Have I spent so much gray matter worrying about face masks and hand sanitizer that I've somehow forgotten the technique I've always used to sheet in the mainsail to catch the breeze and speed my pickle-green hull across the water?

I stepped onto the foredeck and picked at the line that was begging to be threaded through the pullies ... the sun warmed my shoulders and I lost myself in the mindless task, tying a bowline here, attaching a cunningham clip over there and organizing the brightly colored lines into their respective jam cleats.

A light breeze blew my long-uncut hair into my eyes, and I absently brushed it away, turning to look at the line of ripples the wind was drawing across the lake. Without thinking I pulled on the sailing gloves someone had bought me for Christmas before the pandemic made all my now-dead spring and summer plans questionable at best.

I slid into the water and lowered the boat to the surface, then dragged it to the buoy I tether it to while I raised the sail.

I freed the painter and climbed on, shoving off gently as the breeze filled the sail and pushed me forward. A quick shakedown of random tacks and jibes followed by a gust or two that hiked me out over the side, and the catharsis of the lake settled my morning anxieties.

I smiled. Pandemic be damned, I screamed silently in giddy rebellion. I'm sailing ... I am alive.

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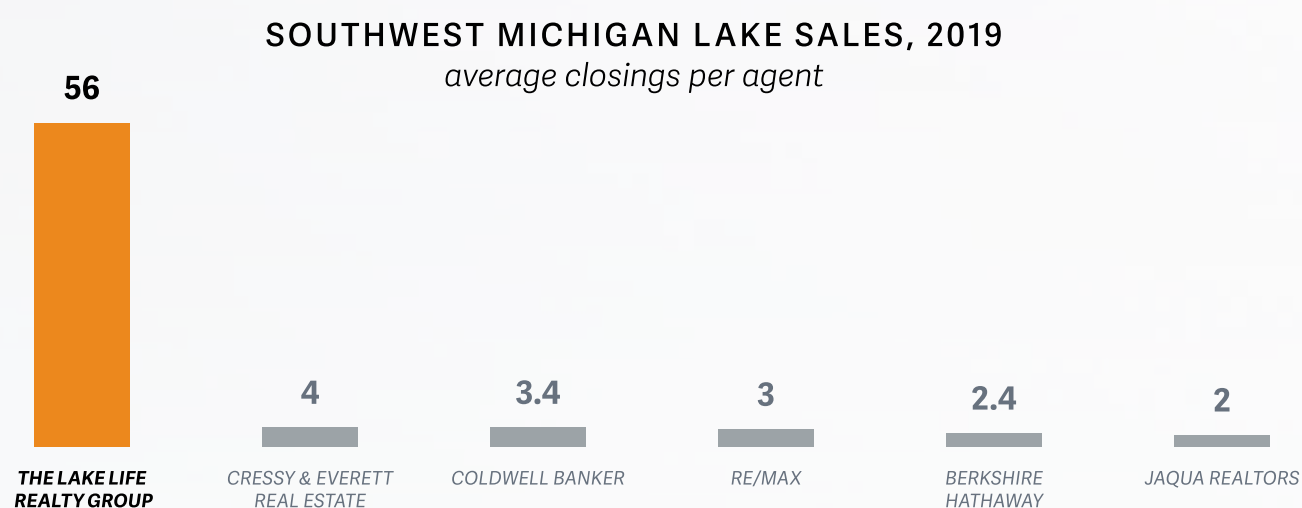
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