



PARDEE HOME MUSEUM NEWSLETTER

Oakland City Landmark, 1975
National Register of
Historic Places, 1976
California Historical Landmark, 1998

WINTER 1999

Pardee Home Foundation Announces \$250,000 Grant from Michigan's Gerstacker Foundation

Christmas arrived a little early at the Pardee Home last year, when, in early December, the Foundation trustees received word of a \$250,000 grant from the Rollin Gerstacker Foundation in Midland, Michigan. This grant is to be used to establish, for the first time ever, a separate endowment fund for the museum, in support of its "general well-being and progress." To further promote the goal of "buttressing the long-term viability and prosperity of the museum," the Gerstacker trustees also issued a challenge grant to the Pardee Home board, promising to match one for one any further endowment funds raised by the Oakland board, up to \$50,000 in each of the next five years.

The Pardee House of Midland, Michigan - Home to the Rollin Gerstacker Foundation

Most readers of this newsletter have probably never pencilled in Midland, Michigan - population 38,000, located approximately 100 miles northwest of Detroit - as an obvious destination point for their domestic travels. However, if you should ever find yourself in Midland with some spare time on your hands, you might consider a stroll past its notable Pardee House, located at 812 W. Main St. Midland is not only the home of Dow Chemical Company, a \$20 billion-a-year firm which competes with DuPont for the title of the largest chemical producer in the U.S., but it is also the site of a remarkable cluster of buildings, including the Pardee House, designed by Alden B. Dow, a son of Herbert Dow, the founder of the chemical-producing titan bearing his name.

Alden Dow was born in Midland in 1904, only eight years after his father had moved there from his native Cleveland to begin the manufacture of chlorine bleach. He attended public schools in Midland and matriculated at the University of Michigan to study engineering and prepare for a career in his father's steadily growing and prospering firm. However, he eventually realized that his vocation lay elsewhere and transferred to Columbia University, where he graduated in 1931 with a degree in architecture. In 1933, he spent over five months at Frank Lloyd Wright's renowned home and studio, Taliesin, in Spring

As detailed in the accompanying article, there are family ties between the Pardees of Oakland and the Gerstackers of Michigan. Carl Gerstacker, the chief benefactor of the Michigan foundation named after his father, wrote to Augusta Pardee Nielson, a close relative of "our" Pardee sisters, in 1984 that he was very fond of "Uncle George and cousins Madeline and Helen" (Governor Pardee was actually the first cousin of Gerstacker's "Uncle Jim" Pardee in Midland). The Gerstacker Foundation has given generously to Oakland's Pardee Home since shortly after work began in the 1980's on turning this Oakland landmark into a public museum, and it has continued to do so following Carl Gerstacker's death in 1995. The foundation has specifically helped finance the seismic retrofitting work done on the house before the 1989 earthquake, emergency repairs following that disaster, and the ongoing task of cataloging the museum's vast collections of objects and archival documents, as well as general operating support.

Deanna Lyon, Chairperson of the Pardee Home Foundation Trustees, notes that "the Pardee Home has been blessed by the extraordinary personal generosity of Carl and Esther Gerstacker, and by that of their family and colleagues in Midland. Their most recent grant, dedicated as it is to establishing an endowment fund for the museum, is undoubtedly their most significant yet, and it promises a bright new millenium for our beloved Oakland landmark."



The Pardee House of Midland, Michigan

Photo courtesy of E.N. Brandt and the Post Street Archives, Midland

Continued on page 4



Museum Director David Nicolai with golden shovel at the Lafayette Square Park groundbreaking ceremony.



Councilmembers John Russo, Dick Spees and Nancy Nadel listen to Mayor Elihu Harris' comments.

Renovation of Lafayette Square Park is Becoming a Reality

On September 15th of last year a groundbreaking ceremony was held in Lafayette Square Park, located kitty-corner from the museum, across the intersection of 11th St. and Martin Luther King Way, to celebrate the long-delayed rehabilitation of that urban square. Pardee Home Museum Director David Nicolai helped inaugurate the park's rebirth with the help of a golden shovel, along with somewhat more prominent local dignitaries such as Mayor Elihu Harris and Councilmembers Nancy Nadel, Dick Spees, and John Russo.

Almost as old as the city itself, Lafayette Square Park was laid out in 1853, along with six other downtown parks, as a grid of urban squares like those commonly found in East Coast and European cities such as Savannah and London. For many years the park was best known as the site of Chabot Observatory, before encroaching urban lights forced its relocation to the Oakland hills after World War I, and as the "front yard" of Oakland High School, which occupied the lot across 11th Street from the 1890s through the 1920s.

The park has experienced many ups and downs during its long history, including its conversion during the 1950's into a park catering to the recreational needs of senior citizens, hence its still often-heard nickname of "Old Man's Park." That name took on a more ominous tone in recent years, as the park earned a seedier reputation.

Finally, in 1993, the Center for Urban Family Life, affiliated with the First Unitarian Church, initiated a community-based design process for the park's renovation. After countless community meetings a new masterplan for the park was adopted by the city in 1995. Pivotal

grants of money from the National Park Service, the city's Measure I, and the Healthy City Oakland Fund followed, so that work could begin last fall on Phase I of the project, which includes new public bathrooms, a children's playground, serpentine "seatwalls" decorated with plaques of children's art, etc. Unfortunately, Phase I, which is currently scheduled for completion in May, is centered on the area of the park away from the Pardee Home, nearer the intersection of 10th and Jefferson Streets, and until further funds are raised, work cannot begin on Phase II, closer to the Pardee Home, which includes the most formal landscape elements of the plan, along the entire 11th St. edge of the park, and game tables along the MLK Way border.

Thus, we will all have to wait a bit longer to see the complete renovation of the park, including those improvements which will be visible from the front gate of the Pardee Home. But as Nicolai emphasized in his brief comments during the groundbreaking, this park is a vital link between the Preservation Park and Old Oakland historic districts, and proper signage and interpretive plaques for the rehabilitated park are essential if residents and visitors are to appreciate the historic roles of the park and its surroundings. With the renovations of such neighboring sites as the First Unitarian Church, the Greene Library, and Swan's Market, these two historic districts offer as many first-rate historic sites as any urban neighborhood on the West Coast, and with a fitting historical interpretive overlay to the Lafayette Square renovation, a vital piece will be in place for the rebirth of the entire area.

Those wishing to contribute financially to completing the park's renovation should contact the Healthy City Oakland Fund at (510) 238-4700. Many naming opportunities for "historic" benches and light posts, plaques or tiles, and other amenities exist for both individual and institutional donors.
