School House and Pump House Museums

This venue is one of the most visited museums of the size in the country.

by Amy Alderink

History was not my favorite subject in school. Never able to separate the important events from the mundane, I would memorize it all and miss any significant takeaway. The takeaway is the thing that you hear or learn that matters to you because of life experiences, sense of humor, and the like. Therefore, my takeaway is different than my grandmother’s or my son’s, even when presented with the same information. When I visited the Old School House in Douglas, my first “wow” takeaway was something I read on the historical marker sign even before entering the front door. It reads, “The Douglas Union School opened for classes in September 1866. One male and one female teacher taught 129 pupils that year.” Wow! That is a student/teacher ratio that would make today’s parents scream. How was that possible? Jim Schmiechen, historian and my guide for the day, explained to me that the mixed-age classrooms made this ratio possible since students taught each other. Likewise, this same spirit of teaching each other and community-learning continues today at the History Museum with its scores of volunteers as the Saugatuck Douglas Historical Society is almost entirely run by volunteers, over 150 of them.
Two primary locations operate as museums in Saugatuck-Douglas: The Old School House located downtown Douglas and the Museum on the shore of the Kalamazoo River by the base of Mount Baldy and a short walk from the Saugatuck Chain Ferry landing. (Note: You could take the Chain Ferry across the river. The cost is one dollar per person each time you cross.)

Located on Center Street in the heart of Douglas, The Old School House opened its doors as a history center in 2010 and features two brand new permanent exhibits this year: the Back-In-Time Pathway and History Garden and Rowing Them Safely Home: Shipwrecks and Lifesaving on the Great Lakes. The School, built in the classical Italianate form, was the largest building in town at the time it was built in the 1860s. The community demanded the architecture have high aesthetic standards to reflect their high academic goals.

The new Back-In-Time Pathway winds through the one acre History Garden behind the Old School House. Stories along the path shed light on the link between azaleas and the Saugatuck area (yes, there is a link), as well as points out historical sights such as Mt. Baldhead that can be viewed from the garden. A small peach orchard and an interactive area for the kids provide a great mix of history, nature and art.

Rowing Them Safely Home: Shipwrecks and Lifesaving on the Great Lakes is a new permanent exhibit located in a separate building behind the Old School House that features one of only two remaining Francis lifeboats in the United States. Designed by Joseph Francis, the metal lifeboat became the regulation lifeboat on every American ocean-going ship and was utilized at coastal lifesaving stations, including those on the Great Lakes. In 1854, the Saugatuck Francis lifeboat was delivered to the Saugatuck Lighthouse as one of 23 provided by the US government to Lake Michigan shoreline communities. Rescuers used
through various fundraisers.

One of the fundraisers taking place now is “Save the Barrel”. The Barrel is a crazy building that in its heyday in the 1950’s served as a drive-up restaurant. The Barrel is exactly that - a huge barrel. A group of volunteers, called “the Friends of the Barrel,” have dismantled the structure and are working to restore it to its former, fun-loving glory. There are many ways you can get involved in saving the Barrel as well as help out in other ways in the Society. Check out their website for all the details. Be sure to visit all the exhibits this season and discover your takeaway.

this lifeboat to row out to disabled ships to save the sailors. Unfortunately, the boat fell into disrepair and languished in the lighthouse keeper’s shed until its first restoration in 1930. After restoration, the Saugatuck boat was named the Gallinipper, the Indian name for “giant mosquito,” by the Sea Scouts who restored her.

In addition to the Old School House location, the Saugatuck-Douglas Historical Society also operates the Saugatuck-Douglas Museum that is approximately one mile away on the river. Housed in the historic former Village of Saugatuck Pump House on the Kalamazoo River, the Museum typically mounts one major exhibit annually. Since the exhibits change annually you have a wonderful reason to visit every year. With over 10,000 visitors annually, this venue is one of the most visited museums of the size in the country.

The beautiful garden and harbor-front walkway along the Kalamazoo River are open to the public at all times as there are no barricades or entry fees. Speaking of entry fees, there are no fees for enjoying the Museum or Old School House. With over 600 members in the Historical Society, the Museum relies on funding from members, donations, grants and money raised through various fundraisers.

Pump House Museum is open 12-4 pm daily through August and on weekends in September through October 28. Award winning museum’s 2012 exhibition is an updated version of “Our Village Life.” Photographs, artifacts and stories uncover the mysteries and stories of daily life in the Saugatuck area (1890-1950). The permanent interactive “super map” allows visitors to learn the history of sites throughout the local communities. Special group tours by request. The museum is in the historic Pump House at Mt. Baldhead Park, 735 Park Street, Saugatuck. Free.

School House website sdhistoricalsociety.org for details or call 269.857.7900 for School House hours in Douglas. Free.