

# SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS HISTORY CENTER

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## SAUGATUCK-DOUGLAS HISTORY MUSEUM'S NEW EXHIBITION TELLS VILLAGES' ROLE IN, AND EVOLUTION DURING, COLD WAR

MAY 19, 2017 -- An ambitious new two-year exhibition at the Saugatuck-Douglas History Museum opens for the season on Memorial Day weekend at Noon, Sunday, May 28, contrasting the complex stories of Mt. Baldhead's role in the "Cold War" of the 1950-70s and the cultural evolution that characterized Saugatuck and Douglas during that volatile period.

The Museum occupies the historic Saugatuck Pump House at 735 Park Street, in a scenic garden setting along the west bank of the Kalamazoo River at Mt. Baldhead Park, a short walk north from the Saugatuck Chain Ferry landing. Nearby parking and admission are free; donations are gratefully appreciated.

Titled *Cold War | Hot Towns: Saugatuck-Douglas in the 1950s-1970s*, the new exhibition relates how a sleepy resort community became a battlefield for conflicting "invasions" in the unpredictable and scary early years of the atomic age.

The exhibition's centerpiece, a 13-foot-tall tower depicting Saugatuck's iconic Mt. Baldhead radar tower, features a four-sided display highlighted with pieces of the original radar instrumentation and a video presentation. The display dramatizes both the Cold War's existential tensions and the tower's creation in 1956 as part of America's first electronic early-warning system against airborne attack.

A high-tech marvel in its day, this radar network replaced human skywatching plane spotters -- one of whom was Saugatuck's recently-honored Citizen of the Year, artist Peggy Boyce. Initially built with no enclosing dome, the tower's relentlessly rotating radar screen looked down upon a divided nation, in an unsettling era of fallout shelters, school "duck and cover" practice and air-raid drills. Ironically, it symbolized both the state-of-the-art in defensive protection and the silent, pervasive fear that a nuclear nightmare could start at any moment.

Around the exhibition's periphery, the community's concurrent cultural changes unfold in successive text and visual panels, enhanced with slide-show and video presentations. They tell the story of how, after the Great Depression and WWII, Saugatuck's era of resort vacationing faded away to what seemed a symbolic end when the Big Pavilion burned down in 1960. In that rapidly-changing world, new and better cars, superhighways, air travel and plenty of cash were drawing the pre-war tourist clientele away to more exotic destinations, while the village, waterfront and harbor began spiraling into decline.

The story continues, detailing how the community rebuilt its "brand", refreshing Oval Beach with a new bathhouse and adding new riverside docks extended to become the state's longest boardwalk, lined with restaurants, bars and tourist accommodations. Development soon attracted fashionable yachts and sleek motorboats, sailing races, water skiing and sport fishing -- and the nickname "Michigan's Riviera".

Seeking a stronger competitive edge, Saugatuck also launched a series of music festivals so successful that they ultimately attracted an explosive mix of wild youth in fast cars, college students, hippies and motorcycle gangs who arrived on summer weekends by the thousands...inevitably leading to drunken riots and property damage. Local authorities had their hands full, but the music played on, the visitors had a blast, and Saugatuck's nickname changed to the "Hottest Town in Michigan".

To test the memories of those old enough to recall the era, the exhibition includes a "Guess the Decades" game inviting visitors to match trivia with the 1950s, 1960s or 1970s, focusing on hottest car, song, fashion, etc. A feedback station will invite visitors to leave written memories of the era or comments about the exhibition, offering an e-mail portal through which they can later share Saugatuck-area experiences or photos reflecting those years.

*Cold War | Hot Towns* is entirely the work of volunteers, led by chief researcher and curator Dr. Jim Schmiechen of Douglas and head exhibit designer Sally Winthers of Saugatuck Twp. They were assisted by a cast of skillful volunteers who have helped with everything from research and photo selection to painting, assembling and installing pieces of the exhibit, and developing new video and slideshow displays. The local community has also assisted, loaning a variety of objects and artifacts for exhibit.

--- New T-Shirt, Interactive "SuperMap" Featured ---

To commemorate the new exhibition, the Museum's south gallery gift shop offers a new, limited-edition *Cold War | Hot Towns* T-Shirts. Continuing the History Center's tradition of offering locally authored books created to accompany exhibits past and present, the shop also highlights the popular Big Pavilion book by Saugatuck author-historian Kit Lane, telling the story of the town's grandest attraction from its construction in 1909 to the day it burned down in May of 1960.

The south gallery again features the History Center's popular "SuperMap" -- a 6-foot high, 12-foot wide illustrated color wall map of the Saugatuck-Douglas area with an interactive computer display to provide a virtual tour through these historic villages, highlighting significant people, places and events of both past and present. Map artwork, created by Holland artist-cartographer Mark Cook based on Historical Society research, recalls the entertaining illustration/poster maps of the 1940-50 era, combining street layouts with stylized sketches and notes.

The map offers Museum visitors an engaging way to soak up the story of the Saugatuck-Douglas area. As many as 70 map-highlighted references are keyed by number to let visitors select and learn about sites of interest by calling up information, narratives and images using a video/interactive touch-screen terminal near the map.

Founded in 1992, the History Museum is open daily Noon to 4pm from Memorial Day weekend through Labor Day, then with the same hours every Saturday and Sunday through September and October. For more information, call: (269) 857-7900. To learn more about Saugatuck-Douglas History Center, its History Museum in Saugatuck and its Old School House History Center in Douglas, visit [www.MySDHistory.org](http://www.MySDHistory.org).

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*Hanging wallpaper display panels for S-D History Museum's new exhibition, volunteer exhibit designer Sally Winthers (center), confirms correct placement with Theresa Agius (Agius/Zelenka Decorating, Fennville) as Michael Zelenka (right) finishes hanging another panel.*



*Volunteers assemble the Cold War | Hot Towns exhibit for the summer 2017 season.*



*The exhibit discusses the good, the bad, and the ugly of the time period, including Law and Disorder, and the presence of motorcycle gangs.*



*Visitors explore the popular SuperMap interactive historic exhibit at the History Museum.*