

# Legacy

A newsletter of the

Bloomfield Historical Society

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"We shape our dwellings;  
thereafter they shape us"

Winston Churchill, 1944

## Bloomfield's Visionary Architects:

*Editor's note:*

*The dwellings of Bloomfield inform us about who we have been as well as who we are today. They shape us now as they have shaped us since our predecessors first came to this area nearly 200 years ago.*

*Guest writer Julie Fitzpatrick brings us one in a series of the stories behind the people who have added to Bloomfield's built environment and sense of place.*

### Clair W. Ditchy, FAIA



A basic wood cottage on the shore of Lake Erie's Kelleys Island was the birthplace of Clair Ditchy in 1891. From this humble home Ditchy grew up to become president of the American Institute of Architects.

A collection of Ditchy-designed homes can be seen today in the Bloomfields, Birmingham, Beverly Hills and Royal Oak. In all, they are charmingly refined and appealing.

*Ditchy — continued on page 3*

## From the Board

**Apples are being pressed** at Bloomfield's historic Cider Mill, adding to the signs that the seasons are changing. A warm Fall welcome from the Board to our new and renewing members!

In the spirit of early pioneer harvest celebrations the annual Corn Roast was held at the School Farm [See the editorial by the Eccentric's Greg Kowalski on page 4.] Preservation Bloomfield hosts this event to benefit the restoration of the Benjamin-Barton Farmhouse and the Craig Log Cabin. The Society (one of the "4-B's" in Preservation Bloomfield) again assisted in this year's "bigger and better" happening.



Mi-Kwan-dohn added to the Roast with tales from Bloomfield's First People.

In 2007, during a Local History/Local Resources program on the Historic Wing Lake Schoolhouse, Board member Lanie Tobin pointed out that Clair W. Ditchy - as Secretary of the American Institute of Architects - signed the Award of Merit honoring the 1948 first classroom addition to the Schoolhouse. In this issue Lanie and her sister Julie Fitzpatrick tell us more about their famous father.

The nation's remembrance of the Sesquicentennial of the Civil War continues. We'd like to know if the Society's program *Michigan In The Civil War*, presented by Al Eicher, inspired you to do some research into an ancestor's role in the War? Tell us what you learned at [info@bloomfieldhistoricalsociety.org](mailto:info@bloomfieldhistoricalsociety.org)

If you'd like to volunteer on any of our projects, let us know via our e-mail above.

See you at September's program, *If Woodward Avenue Could Talk*, and **please bring along any souvenirs** you might have collected during the original cruises - photos, a menu from Teds or ... ?

*Ditchy — Continued from page 1*

The beginning of the architect's career unfolded at the University of Michigan. He first earned a degree in English literature (1911) and then pursued another in architecture (1915). During these years, he painted signs to pay for his tuition.

After graduation, he was promptly hired by the prestigious Albert Kahn Architectural Firm in Detroit.

Although Ditchy enjoyed this special career opportunity, the country was engaged in World War I and he felt a strong patriotic duty to do his part. In 1917, he enlisted and was sent to France with the American Expeditionary Force where he taught French soldiers a working vocabulary in American English, including terms for military practices and equipment. Fluent in French, he thoroughly enjoyed his two years teaching soldiers and living in a French village.



Ditchy returned to Kahn's office at the end of the war, but set out on his own two years later. A sign of their continuing good relationship was the fact that Kahn, when possible, sent business to Ditchy during the Great Depression, when projects were scarce. He focused the early years of his practice on the design of houses - small, large, private - even public, such as Brewster and Parkside Public Housing

Projects in Detroit.

The young architect purchased property in Birmingham when he married Berenice Bookmyer in 1920. His intention of designing a home for his future family there never came to fruition and the couple continued to live in Royal Oak. He had three daughters: Diane, Lanie and Julie. Ironically, the president of the American Architects and the expert on housing never lived in a house of his own design.

Ditchy taught architecture at the University of Michigan for several years and accepted an invitation from the Detroit Free Press to be a regular columnist.



*Quarton Road at Cranbrook*

In 1935, as the Great Depression waned, the Federal Housing Administration called for an effort to promote the building of private residences and improve standards of design. In response to this

need, Ditchy and three colleagues established the Small House Associates of Detroit and Ditchy went on to lead the Small House Architects of Michigan as president.

Obviously an expert on the subject by this time, he was summoned to Washington to speak before Congress.

As the years went by, Ditchy expanded his focus from small or medium-size houses to large civic, religious and

institutional buildings. For his alma mater he designed the Alice Crocker Lloyd residence hall. The first construction on the university's campus following the conclusion of World War II, the project was challenged by scarcity of resources in that postwar period. However, it was acclaimed for its style and ambience, particularly the use of natural light. Ditchy chose attractive, modern furnishings for the



*Alice Crocker Lloyd Hall*

students' rooms.

At the other end of the residential spectrum, the architect designed a dormitory for the criminally insane in Ionia, Mich, using color to influence the inmates. Closer to home, the Shrine Elementary School, at 12 Mile and Woodward Avenue in Royal Oak -

now patched with unflattering additions - was one of his schools

In 1944, when Ditchy was accepted as a Fellow of the American Institute of Architects, the citation read "An outstanding architect of splendid character, high ideals and unusual executive ability." Soon after, an article in National Architect Magazine (Nov. 1945) stated, "During his extensive period of practice, Ditchy has become one of the best known and best liked architects in the nation."

He was elected and re-elected as President of the American Institute of Architects in 1952 and '53.

As Ditchy continued his passionate support of the architectural profession, he was sought after as an amusing and erudite public speaker —



*Cranbrook Road in Bloomfield Village*

always wearing his signature bow-tie and a genial smile. He enjoyed introducing Frank Lloyd Wright on several occasions and hosted "the Great One" at a small family dinner at the Detroit Athletic Club one year. The guests were Olgivanna and Frank Wright, Berenice and Clair Ditchy, and two of the Ditchys' daughters.

In Ditchy's final years, he received two gold medals from architectural societies, two honorary degrees from universities, several honorary memberships in foreign architectural institutes, and invitations to lead international architectural tours.

Ditchy's legacy remains woven into the fabric of our area

*Julie Fitzpatrick*

*Images provided by Lanie Tobin*