

Henry Ford's 'inn-put' makes a difference

Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of excerpts from the book, "More Than A Tavern — 150 Years of Botsford Inn," published by the Botsford Inn in cooperation with the Farmington Hills Historical Commission, 1986, as a sesquicentennial tribute to Michigan's longest surviving hostelry. By Joan M. Fox, special writer

Botsford was the second inn to catch (Henry) Ford's fancy. In 1923 he had purchased the Red Lion Inn at Sudbury, Mass., and was in the process of restoring it. This famous New England inn had been the setting for Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Tales of a Wayside Inn," and Ford re-christened it with this title. Restoration was elegant and in keeping with the valuable and nobly appropriate old time furnishings.

Ford immediately moved Botsford back 200 feet, and the highway was widened.

Restoration was painstaking and thorough.

"The Botsford Tavern was in very good shape to look at from the outside," recalled Edward J. Cutler, who was in charge of building design and reconstruction.

At Greenfield Village under the direct supervision of Ford. "It stood right next to the road. The first thing we did was pick it up and move it two hundred feet back from the road. Of course, since then they have made a double road of Grand River, so it pushes the building a little closer to the street than it was intended to be."

Frank Botsford was with the builders all the time during the reconstruction. "It was a matter of repairing it, fixing it up, and of course we extended the back end of the ball room. We made it bigger than it was. It was just a reconstruction job," Cutler recalled in 1932. "We made the dining room larger and we added a more modern kitchen."

THE RESTORATION was to be a "storybook of the past," Ford said. The walls of the ballroom were to be hung with many curious old illustrated covers of pieces of dance music, dating from the early Victorian period, from the days of hoop skirts, the days of the gallop and the whirling waltz, the days when the skirt movement of the Varsovienne and the Mazurka first enchanted American dancers.

Above the music platform in the

ballroom hung an old print of the Arkansaw Tractor.

Ford, who was an avid square dancer, must have been entranced with the ballroom which the Inn contained. Square dancers like a good "bounce" to their floor when they're dancing. So Ford set about assuring the "bounce." He put in a suspended floor, renovating the one he and Clara had enjoyed, put together with special gaskets under each wooden peg. The "bounce," square dancers say with a gleam in their eye, is terrific.

"The ballroom floor . . . we made a particularly good job on that. We put a maple floor in there. The random width was two inches thick . . . It was a beautiful floor, and a lovely floor to dance on. Mr. and Mrs. Ford had several dances up there."

The ballroom was almost doubled in size. Originally about 30 x 50 feet, it now, under Ford's eagle eye, became 30 x 80. Other pictures were offered, showing how the Inn would look. A circular chandelier sat complete with chandelier lamps, "those dangerous, oft-exploding illuminants," was planned.

"For this hotel is not only older than the electric light, it is older

than the kerosene lamp. The kerosene lamps which stand in brackets here and there about the old hostelry are a part of the later furnishings," Frank Botsford told reporters.

RECONSTRUCTION INCLUDED sprucing up the living room and tap room, as well as restoring the original old kitchen fireplace. In an adjoining room (now the Stephen Jennings Room) Ford wanted panelling, with beautiful woodwork to set off the smoked-wood finish he wanted on the panelling, an unusual technique was used. Ford had a plantation in the South where meats were smoked. Why not, he reasoned, darken the panelling and cure the wood the same way you did hams?

So the room was panelled in pine, which is soft wood and absorbent; then corn cobs were brought in, dumped into barrels, and a fire lit under the cobs. Soon the barrels were emitting a soft smoke. The room was sealed off (there was a fireplace at one end to carry off the excess fumes) and the corn cobs in the barrels smoked for several days. The fumes colored and penetrated the pinewood of the panelling, giving the deep rich permanent hue, and no doubt flavoring the wood as well.

One thing which delighted Ford was the discovery in the Inn of what was termed "the largest collection of Hitchcock chairs in America." There were 80 of them, in the ballroom. Ford immediately took them to Greenfield Village for use there, substituting reproduction Hitchcocks (which were crafted at the Village) at Botsford Inn. . . .

Ford added modern conveniences, electrified the kitchen, refurbished the exterior and furnished the Inn with many of the antiques he favored. A gleaming white picket fence now surrounded the property;

landscaping beautified the grounds, tended carefully by Ford gardeners. For Mrs. Ford, national president of the Women's Farm and Garden Association, there was a lovely rose garden, complete with authentic Michigan stone walls to protect the flowers from strong Michigan winds. © 1986

Jean M. Fox, Farmington resident who is active in historical organizations at both the state and county level, has written three books and many articles on local history.

briefly speaking

PREVIEW RECEPTION

As part of their fund-raising efforts, the Plymouth Symphony League is offering tickets to a preview reception for the league's annual annual mart held in connection with the annual Plymouth Fall Festival.

A \$10 donation covers a wine and hors d'oeuvres reception from 8-10 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 4 in the Plymouth Cultural League, 525 Farmer Street. It also gives participants the opportunity to shop and purchase items before the show opens to the general public. Reservations are required and the deadline is tomorrow. Call Marge Bourke, 420-2099.

INN ARTS AND CRAFTS

The Dearborn Inn will host the Dearborn Arts and Crafts Club Show on the grounds of the historic property from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 6, and Sunday, Sept. 7. The show features a variety of works in the following media: watercolors, oils, pastels, pen and ink, pottery, china painting and weaving. There is no admission charge. For more information, call Charles Frendo, 277-

6995. The Dearborn Inn is at 20301 Oakwood Boulevard, Dearborn.

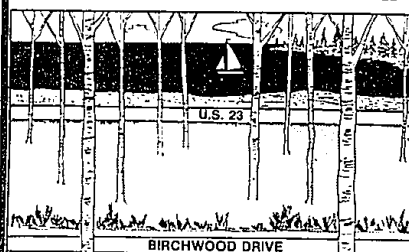
ART ON THE GREEN

The Franklin Community Association's 42nd annual Labor Day Round-up will take place Labor Day in historic Franklin Village. For the sixth year, "Art on the Green" will also be part of the festivities. This juried art show will have over 60 local and out-of-town artists participating. Other highlights include a midway with many games of chance; a horse show; bake sale and contest; garden produce contest; plus cuisine de carnavale. Fair hours are 10 a.m. and 6 p.m.

COBBLESTONE FARM SHOW

The grounds of Ann Arbor's historic Cobblestone Farm will be the site of a fine arts and crafts fair Friday-Saturday, Sept. 6-7. Art work ranging from pottery and photography to country wood and teddy bears will be displayed for sale by 50 of the Midwest's leading artists and craftsmen.

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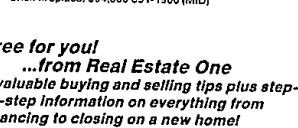
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