

Reflections from the Clarke

Spring 2010

Volume 32

Going Places in Michigan with Leonard Gas

The Clarke Library's current exhibit, *Going Places in Michigan with Leonard Gas*, celebrates the wonders of Michigan's outdoors. The show will run through August.

Leonard was a regional company headquartered in Alma, and its gas stations were located almost exclusively in Michigan. Although today the Leonard name is only a memory, in the mid-twentieth century it was a major brand in Michigan and a key sponsor of tourism in the state; beginning in 1956 Leonard undertook a systematic and statewide campaign to promote tourism. For fourteen years Leonard's efforts made the company name mean "Michigan Outdoors" in ways that are nearly inconceivable today.

The story of Leonard Refineries, as the company was originally named, began in 1936. J. Walter Leonard, who had been extremely successful in finding oil in mid-Michigan, formed a publicly held company

and purchased a refinery that was being constructed in Alma. In 1938 the Leonard Refineries began selling products to consumers under its own name. By 1961 more than 700 service stations were either directly owned by the company or were independently operated but selling gasoline under the Leonard name.

Most of Leonard's early advertising campaigns focused on the quality of its products and the services offered at the many gas stations that sold Leonard gasoline. In the mid-1950s, however, the firm realized that while its advertising had won the company great success, Leonard did not stand out from other similar companies in a distinctive or memorable way.



J. Walter Leonard

In 1956 Leonard adopted a new sales strategy based on tourism. Named "Going Places in Michigan," the key element of this campaign was a successful television show, *Michigan Outdoors*, which was shown throughout the state. *Michigan Outdoors*, its host Mort Neff, and of course the show's new principal sponsor, Leonard Refineries, attracted more than 2.5 million viewers weekly and became synonymous with outdoor activities for a generation of Michiganders.

Michigan Outdoors originated in 1951 when Mort Neff became the "temporary" host of a fifteen-minute television show that was broadcast in Detroit and devoted to outdoor activities. Neff was a journalist whose career goals included covering a wide range of outdoor activities.

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In the 1950s consumers expected a uniformed attendant to be waiting at the pump who would take care of filling the gas tank and service the car.

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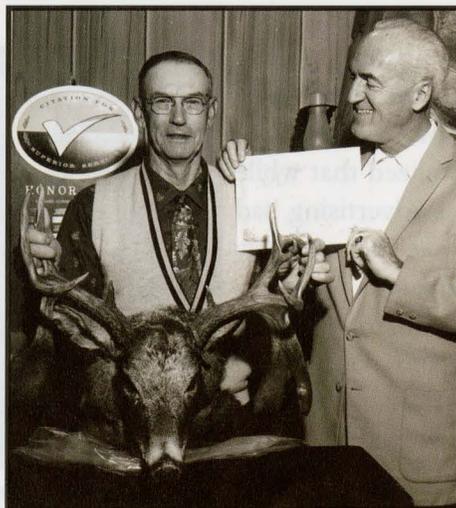
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The show was a success, and it was not long before it expanded, both in length—to thirty minutes—and in scope. Neff, who quickly purchased all rights to the program, bought air time from television stations across the state and simulcast the program in several areas. For a large number of Michiganders, tuning in to Mort Neff and *Michigan Outdoors* on Thursday nights at 7 p.m. was an activity second in importance only to attending religious services; and at least a few people ranked watching Neff as preferable to that activity.

Leonard Refineries both sponsored the program and built a large number of promotions around it. Almost all of the promotions included free

merchandise from “your local Leonard station.” The most prominent item was a monthly publication, *Going Places in Michigan*, later renamed the *Go Guide*, which was first distributed at Leonard facilities in May 1956. Each issue promoted a wide range of tourist activities. Typically the publication included several “main” stories about major events, a calendar listing “other” activities, a map of choice fishing spots selected by Mort Neff, and additional “tips” for readers.

Behind the scenes Leonard’s advertising agency divided the state into fifteen “zones” and made an effort to promote attractions in each zone. Stories found in *Going Places in Michigan* reported on a wide variety of activities. As one might expect, hunting and fishing were usually given extensive coverage. There was an endless stream of events such as the annual “Big Buck Contest,” which celebrated the state’s most successful deer hunters, as well as various summer and winter fishing competitions, but Neff and Leonard saw their audience as more than sportsmen. Featured both on the television show and in the pages of *Going Places in Michigan* were scenic drives



Neff (right) with the winner of the annual “Big Buck Contest.”

and overlooks, places of interest for fans of photography, historical sites, showboats and summer-theater venues, winter activities, and a wide range of special events or attractions, including rodeos, ox roasts, golf tournaments, county fairs, religious shrines, lighthouses, and anything else the public might find interesting.

Soon enough, Leonard not only identified places to visit in Michigan, but also partnered with Mort Neff to organize activities for outdoorsmen and sponsor such events. In fall 1958 Leonard organized the “Leonard Outdoors Club of Michigan,” and Mort Neff “personally” encouraged the state’s residents to join. The company, usually working with Neff, sponsored various festivals and activities, such as an annual “Carp Carnival” in Monroe County, an event in which more than 2,000 archers tested their skills against carp. “Tip-Up-Town,” an annual ice-fishing festival in Houghton Lake was also a favorite of both Mort Neff and Leonard Gas. Because gasoline sales tended to decline in winter, the company welcomed and promoted cold-weather activities of all types. For example, in 1958 the company sponsored *Michigan Outdoors*’s first annual ski festival at Caberfae Lodge, sixteen miles west of Cadillac. However the company’s largest single event-related commitment was linked to recreational boating.

In 1959 Michigan residents owned more than 436,000 power-boats, second only to New York State. Throughout much of the 1960s the number of registered boats in Michigan ranked either first or second in the nation. With so many boats in the water, Leonard saw a market for marine products and sold these items using the easily remembered slogan,

“Best by Far for Boat and Car.” In 1958 Leonard introduced a fuel designed especially for outboard motors.

Looking for a way to market its marine products more effectively, Leonard became a major sponsor of the Greater Michigan Boat Show, which was originally called the Detroit Boat Show. Leonard became a sponsor of the show in 1958. By 1959 the Greater Michigan Boat Show was the third largest boat show in the nation. In 1961 more than 100,000 people paid \$1.00 apiece to attend the exhibits. Naturally, the show featured a large Leonard booth where boat owners could often find Mort Neff talking to vendors, experts, and guests as well as filming segments for Thursday evening's show.

Although after 1956 *Michigan Outdoors* and travel in Michigan were the firm's signature advertising emphases, Leonard never stopped its other marketing activities. The company continued to advertise the quality of its products and services, and it sponsored a wide variety of giveaways and promotions. For example,

in 1956 every Leonard service station gave away a bicycle to the child who had gathered the most coupons; one coupon was awarded for every gallon of gas purchased at Leonard stations. In 1961 Leonard offered customers the opportunity to buy “Golden Rhapsody” chinaware, which was advertised in *Vogue* magazine for \$5.25 a place setting but was available at Leonard stations for only 99 cents, with a minimum purchase of eight gallons of gas.

It was not long before Leonard added flatware and glasses to complement its discounted china. Leonard also had a forty-eight-piece “bar-b-q picnic kit” available for 49 cents for those whose plans for dinner were a bit more casual. In another promotion, Leonard offered souvenir glasses stamped with various images, including the nearly completed Mackinac Bridge, the Hartwick Pines State Park, and the Soo Locks. These glasses were “free” with a minimum purchase of ten gallons of gas. Leonard stations offered a wide variety of giveaways and promotions.

Despite *Going Places in Michigan*, *Michigan Outdoors*, and various other forms of advertising, the leaders of the seemingly successful, regionally based Leonard Refineries saw a troubled future for their company. As a small refinery, Leonard lacked the capital and other resources to compete with national brands. As a result, by the late 1950s Leonard was

looking for a partner that could pour needed capital into the company. In 1959 it announced a plan to merge with SOHIO. The threat of a federal antitrust suit eventually led both companies to abandon the plan; however, Leonard continued to look for a partner.

In 1966 a French firm, Compagnie Française des Pétroles, whose North American subsidiary operated under the name Total, purchased a one-third stake in Leonard. In 1970 the company bought the remaining shares of Leonard and rebranded its gas stations with the Total name. Total was advertised as “the international gasoline,” and “the international gasoline” soon ended regionally based advertising, including sponsoring *Michigan Outdoors*.

Despite the loss of a key sponsor, Mort Neff and *Michigan Outdoors* managed to stay on the air. Neff retired from the show in 1975 and died in 1990. In 1977 the show ended. Several years later the Michigan United Conservation Clubs revived the program on public television, where it continues to be seen weekly with a slightly different name: *Michigan Out-Of-Doors*.

The company's fate was less fortunate. In 1997 San Antonio-based Ultramar Diamond Shamrock purchased Total from its French parent company. Ultramar was an independent business which was rapidly expanding in an attempt to

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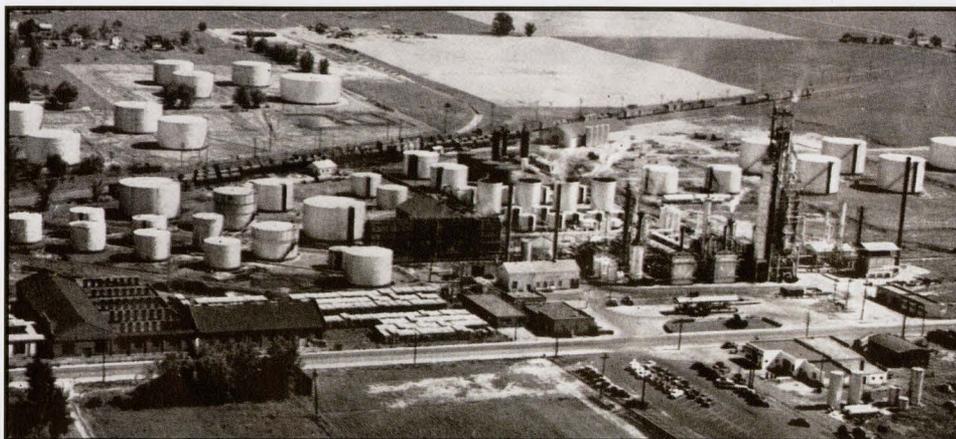
create a new, national brand of gasoline. Perhaps because its expansion was so hasty, many of Ultramar's purchases were not well thought out. Total was one of the acquisitions that Ultramar quickly resold.

In 1999 Marathon Ashland Petroleum bought Ultramar's 179 Total gas stations and marketed its

gas under the name "Speedway." Contracts to supply fuel to an additional 214 independently owned stations that sold Total gas were also transferred to the company. Ultramar was unable to sell the Alma refinery, and in 1999 it stopped production there. The refinery was demolished in 2003.

During the company's final years,

when its products were marketed under the name Total, the organization was simply a company selling gas. But from 1956 through the early 1970s, Leonard made it possible for the state's residents to experience the treasures found in Michigan's outdoors every week. Through the enterprising journalism of Mort Neff and the tireless promotion of recreational travel by Leonard Gas, Michiganians came to know their state as never before. Today Leonard Gas is gone, but the company's legacy of tourism and outdoor recreation lives on whenever "Pure Michigan" ads appear on television. This campaign's roots and its essence can be found in the tourism promotions sponsored by Leonard more than a half-century ago.



The Leonard Refinery Field in 1951.

Michigan Authors/ Michigan Books

Tune in to WCMU radio the last Tuesday of each month at 8:00 p.m. to hear Michigan Authors/Michigan Books, a series of talks by authors recorded by the Clarke Library, edited by WCMU radio, and made possible through a grant from the Michigan Humanities Council.

Tuesday, April 27:

Valerie van Heest, *ICEBOUND: The Adventures of Young George Sheldon and the SS Michigan*.

Valerie van Heest is an underwater explorer who combines her passion for documenting historic shipwrecks with her creative abilities in order to preserve and promote Michigan's maritime heritage. Her mission is to share what lies beneath the Great Lakes with adults

and children alike through public lectures, museum exhibits, articles, and books, each of which is created to excite, teach, and inspire.

Tuesday, May 25:

Michael Zadoorian, *The Leisure Seeker*.

Michael Zadoorian's book, *The Leisure Seeker*, follows the escapades of an elderly couple who cope with Alzheimer's Disease and dementia as they travel cross-country from Detroit to California in a final attempt to find meaning in their lives. Michael Zadoorian is an accomplished author who has published three novels. He lives in Detroit.

Tuesday, June 29:

Patrick Livingston, *Summer Dreams: The Story of Bob-Lo Island*.

Located on the Canadian side of the Detroit River, just twenty miles

south of downtown Detroit, Bob-Lo Island was the ultimate summer playground for generations of Detroit and Windsor families. In its heyday, the island housed an amusement park with one of the world's largest dance halls, an elegant restaurant, and a hand-carved carousel. Two large excursion steamers constructed at the beginning of the twentieth century, which featured dancing and other entertainments, transported visitors to and from the island. In *Summer Dreams*, Patrick Livingston tells the story of Bob-Lo Island from its discovery by French explorers to its subsequent use by missionaries, the British military, escaped slaves, farmers, and finally to its incarnation as Detroit's summer playground.



“Michigan in Letters” Debuts

What do Hannah Bingham, Sarah Emma Edmonds Seelye, and Frances Margaret Fox have in common? All three of these women’s stories are part of the fabric of Michigan’s great history, and all three have collections of their writings housed in the Clarke Historical Library. Staff members John Fierst and Susan Powers work with documents like the ones written by these women every day, and they wanted to create a new way to share these rich collections with interested readers. History enthusiasts can now enjoy a sampling of various works online by accessing the Clarke’s new blog, “Michigan in Letters” (www.michiganinletters.org).

Hannah Bingham set out on a long, arduous journey in 1829, moving from New York State to the wilds of Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan Territory, to reunite her family and to help her husband Abel with his missionary work among the Chippewa. She was worried about living so far from civilization, but still she was able to appreciate the beauty of the area during her voyage, writing this entry in her diary: We “came into the river yesterday morning, and now we are safely moored in this pleasant river not far from our long sought for home, where we can see mountains, rocks, and islands with their beautiful green.”

Sarah Emma Edmonds Seelye, also known as Frank Thompson, risked her life by disguising herself as a man to fight for the Northern cause during the Civil War. A member

of the Flint Union Greys, Seelye survived the war, but she was seriously hurt when she was thrown from a mule while delivering the mail. In a letter written to a friend near the end of her life she wrote: “On crawling out of the ditch I realized that I had sustained severe injuries. I had no use of my left lower limb. I felt sure it was broken, and the intense pain in my left side, and breast, made me feel sick and faint; while the bare thought of the *undelivered mail* drove me almost frantic.”

Frances Margaret Fox was raised in Mackinac City, where she became an author and learned to cherish the natural beauty of northern Michigan.



Hannah Bingham

She especially loved the Straits of Mackinac, where later in life she built her beloved field-stone house, “Happy Landing.” In spite of an abusive childhood, Frances wrote many delightful, happy stories for children. During her career she published fifty-two children’s books,

including some set in northern Michigan. Her best-known series was the Little Bear books. Her very first Little Bear story begins with the following words: “Before the little bear learned to walk and long before Goldilocks ate his porridge, broke his chair and slept in his bed, the middle-sized bear used to rock him to sleep every day. She was an old fashioned kind of mother and loved to cuddle her baby bear.”

“Michigan in Letters” endeavors to present Michigan history through the actual words of men and women

from Michigan’s past. Visitors to the blog will find images of selected documents, annotated transcriptions of those documents, introductory notes, commentary, and other related illustrations. Documents such as letters or diary entries, or a short series of manuscripts, will be chosen for their interest and edited for their relevance to some aspect of Michigan history. The blogging format was selected to enhance opportunities for interaction between readers and the site’s editors. After perusing a particular document, visitors to “Michigan in Letters” can post questions and comments and learn about documentary editing.

The blog also serves as a model for a small-scale documentary-editing project of the type that is sometimes undertaken by smaller historical societies, libraries, and individuals. The Association for Documentary Editing (www.documentaryediting.org) supports the exchange of ideas for editing projects. Its purpose is to make the papers and documents of important people and groups accessible via various means of publication. The content of “Michigan in Letters” will be edited according to documentary-editing standards that have been established through the work of the association.

Log on to “Michigan in Letters” and read more about Hannah, Sarah, and Frances. Visit us from time to time to enjoy more stories of the people who shaped Michigan’s history. We welcome your comments and questions.



Thank You!

During 2009 the following individuals and organizations have supported the Library. Both the Library's Board of Governors and the staff are deeply grateful for this support. Without it, much of the work accomplished by the Library would not be possible.

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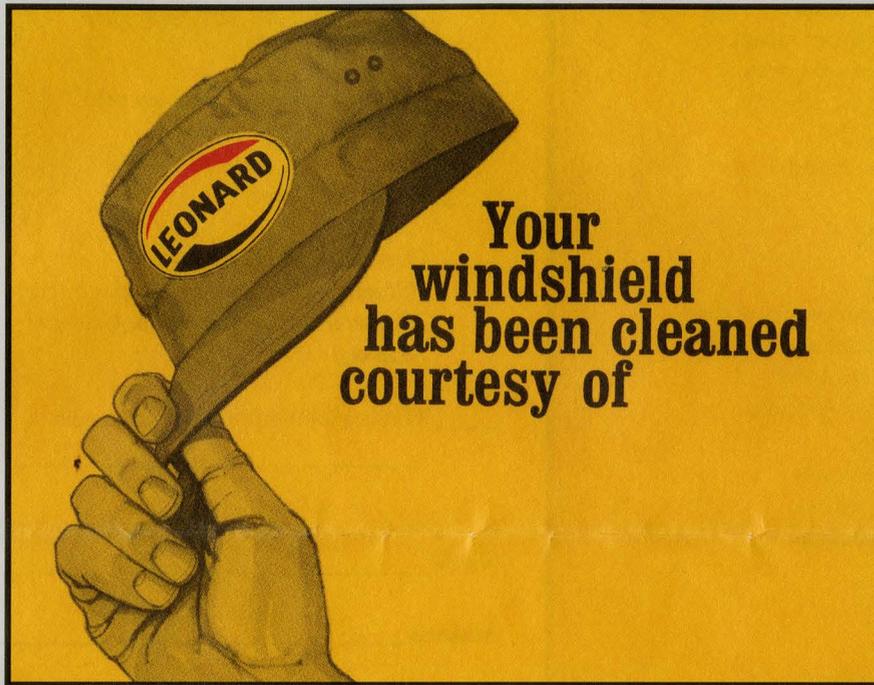
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A Final Word

"Where does this stuff come from?" It was a question I was asked recently by a person looking at the Library's current exhibit. Answering this simple query about the Leonard exhibit is really a way of explaining the ways in which the Library obtains the many resources it houses, such as the picture below.



Much of the Library's "stuff" is received as gifts. Generous individuals often contact the Library about materials in their possession that they are willing to donate. Just as often, however, gifts are given to the Clarke because someone on our staff has contacted an individual or organization.

One of the things researchers and other friends of the Library often share with us is information about material that is owned by someone else. In its simplest manifestation, this means that a researcher in the reading room says, "Good old [insert name here] has a pile of things about this in his basement. You should talk to him about it."

Such a comment often does result in our contacting a potential donor. Occasionally we receive a polite, or perhaps not so polite, "Thanks but no thanks" response, but most people who have saved items love to talk about them. They have invested their time and energy into preserving these treasures, and they are frequently delighted that someone

has called who shares their sense of the material's importance.

A successful initial contact usually leads to a visit. Actually seeing collections before committing Library space and staff to preserve them is essential. Potential donors are invariably sincere in their beliefs about the importance of what they have preserved, but what was glowingly described on the telephone can look a good deal less useful when examined under a 40-watt light bulb in someone's basement. Sometimes it is a lost cause. Typically, there are a few gold nuggets surrounded by a large pile of tailings. Occasionally, however, you simply cannot believe how such wonderful things have survived undetected.

A visit can result in walking out

of a home with the treasure under one's arm or years of conversation. There is a psychology to giving that must be acknowledged and accepted. Because the material is often precious to the owner, he or she is often not prepared to part with it. Potential donors may proudly show you what they have, but when they are asked about a donation say, "Eventually, but I'm not quite ready."

Determining when a potential donor will be ready to let go is an art. Sometimes a life-changing event triggers a gift, such as retirement or moving from a home into an apartment. Sadly, declining health often is part of a donor's decision to give items to the Library. And occasionally the answer is simply, "When I'm gone."

"When I'm gone," invariably leads to the occasionally delicate discussion with a donor about telling his or her family about the planned donation. There are few things more embarrassing than appearing at a home to pick up a planned donation, only to be met by very blank stares on the part of the donor's heirs. We always encourage donors who use their wills to convey gifts to tell family members about their bequests. Planned gifts should be understood as a final act of generosity to the Library rather than give the appearance of a librarian/thief taking away a part of someone's inheritance.

The collections housed in the Clarke Historical Library grow in many different ways, but some of this growth is due to the generosity of the Library's many friends. We could not do our job without them.

Frank Boles



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