

HISTORY OF JESSE BESSER MUSEUM

By

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Out-of-town visitors frequently express surprise that Alpena, a small city in Northern Michigan, has such a complete and functional museum. Solon Weeks, when he was Museum Director of Michigan Historical Commission, inspected the building shortly after it was opened and said, "It is a beautiful museum building, and one of the best I have ever seen."

There had been a gradual development of community interest prior to the establishment of the Jesse Besser Museum. Veteran Fire Chief Ernie Wilson had a small museum in the headquarters of the city fire department. It was a good collection. There were frequent comments that there should be a community museum to house this collection. John Emmett Richards, now deceased, Editor and Publisher of The Alpena News, kept the idea alive. Gerald Haltiner, amateur archaeologist and a good one, was developing a collection of Indian artifacts.

I served as superintendent of Alpena Public Schools from July 1, 1936 until July 1, 1962. Shortly before my retirement Mr. Besser asked me if I thought the community should have a museum. I gave him a hearty affirmative reply, and asked if he were thinking of donating a museum. He said he was giving it some thought, and asked if I had any suggestions. I recommended that it be donated to some governmental unit to give permanence to the collections, and tax support for the expense of operation.

Mr. Besser then asked what governmental unit I would recommend. I suggested Alpena Public Schools because a museum properly designed, equipped, and operated by a professional staff would be an excellent educational and cultural program. He asked if I would present the matter to the Board of Education to ascertain if the Board would accept and operate the museum,

and I did. The Board gave informal agreement subject to official action later. It was generally agreed that the building should be located on the college campus.

The next step was to acquire a site. Habitant Fence Inc., located on Johnson Street to the east of what is now the technical building, was in the area of what seemed to be a good location for the museum. In order to get this land, it was necessary to give Habitant Fence Inc. a new factory building on another site in exchange for its land and building.

Acting on advice of legal counsel, Carl Henry, a corporation known as Alpena Museum Association was formed to effect the exchange of property, and to transact such other business as might be necessary in connection with the establishment of a museum. The Board of Directors was made up of myself as president; Jesse Besser, vice-president; and Fred R. Trelfa, a local historian, secretary-treasurer. This corporation bought land on a D. & M. siding at the intersection of Hamilton and French roads, and retained James A. Spence, Architects, to design a building to meet the requirements of Habitant Fence Inc. The construction contract was let to Albert Skiba August 20, 1962. After the building was completed the exchange of property was effected.

An interesting fact in this connection is that the museum is not built on the site we acquired. It is on Johnson Street west of the technical building in accordance with a master plan of college development adopted in 1964. However, it had always been Mr. Besser's plan to acquire the Habitant Fence Inc. property and give it to Alpena Public Schools.

Immediately after the Board of Education gave informal agreement to accept and operate the museum I took out a membership in the American Association of Museums which entitled me their monthly magazine, publications and many services. As superintendent of schools I had had extensive

experience with building programs, and knew the architect's axiom 'form follows function'. I recommended that we decide what we wanted to accomplish before hiring architects. We decided it should be a living and learning museum which would enrich the educational program in area schools as well as give educational and cultural advantages to the general public.

It was Mr. Besser's wish that the Alpena Museum Association plan the museum building, said plans to be subject to approval of the Board of Education, and this was satisfactory with the Board of Education. James A. Spence, Architects, were retained, and Alpena Museum Association benefited from the long experience of Mr. James A. Spence, Sr. with the Saginaw Museum Association which he had served as president. We worked closely with school officials during the planning.

Mr. Besser took the Board of Directors, James Spence, and Clem Mason, Besser Company Director of Building Services, on a trip by plane to visit museums in several states. Some of the museums were equipped with a planetarium either in the main building or close to it. Jesse, who had an abiding interest in machinery, was fascinated with the planetariums. While we were homeward bound and approaching Alpena, I asked him if he would make the museum large enough for a planetarium if we could raise the money to pay for the planetarium. He replied that he would.

At that time I was a member of a small committee which had been trying for several years to think of something the community could do in honor of Mr. Besser, but had never been able to agree on anything. I said nothing to Mr. Besser about this, but when we were back in Alpena I told Tony Skiba, Chairman of the Committee, about a planetarium honoring Mr. Besser. Tony thought it was a good idea, and he called a meeting of the committee.

The committee made up of Tony Skiba, Chairman, myself as secretary, and Frank Bailey, Harry Cohen, Carl Henry, Harold Hudson, Frederick Johnston, Joseph Sobczak, and Fred Steele decided to go ahead with the project. We arranged for a noon luncheon at the Grove November 6, 1963, and we invited a group of people representing a cross section of Alpena. Twenty nine people attended and gave unanimous approval of the plan whereby every one would be given an opportunity to make a contribution, large or small, for equipping the museum with a planetarium honoring Mr. Besser. John W. Ireland, of Spitz Laboratories, Inc. showed slides of the planetarium and its operation. The 29 local people present pledged a total of \$5,485 toward one half of the \$ 42,000 needed for the planetarium and seats. Federal funds under the National Defense Education Act were available for the other half. It was decided to enlarge the committee to help with the solicitation. A total of 1,227 letters were mailed. All were pledged to secrecy . There was no newspaper publicity, and I am certain that Mr. Besser knew nothing about it until the successful completion of the operation in November 1965. An illustrated brochure was published describing the planetarium, paying tribute to Mr. Besser, and listing names of contributors (not amounts).

The enlarged committee which completed campaign under the leadership of Tony Skiba included the following: Frank Bailey, Harry Cohen, Carl Henry, Harold Hudson, Frederick Johnston, Charles Kimball, Martin Martinson, Eddie Owens, James W. Rau, The Reverend Gilbert Runkel; Tony Skiba, The Reverend Father William Simon, Joseph Sobczak, Fred Steele, Harold Werth, Russell H. Wilson.

Mr. Besser had seen a Foucault Pendulum and wanted one in the museum. Such a pendulum is not a stock item. Clem Mason, who assisted with building planning and later served on the Board of Directors from July 17, 1970 until moving to California in 1971, and I did not know where to find one.

Clem learned that an advertising company had furnished the one he had seen at the Seattle world fair. This company quoted a price of \$10,000 to Clem who mailed the quotation to me at our Florida address. We both thought it was too much. I wrote the company asking pertinent information about the engineering costs, and got no reply.

Later I visited the University of South Florida at Tampa to get some information on planetarium operation. Their planetarium is the same as the one we ordered. After getting the information I needed, I went to the physics building to see if I could get some information from the head of the physics department about where we could get a Foucault Pendulum. Imagine my surprise when I entered the lobby and saw a Foucault Pendulum in operation. The department head told me that the Foucault Pendulum in the United Nations building was purchased through commercial sources and cost them \$10,000. He said the one I saw in the lobby is identical, and cost the university about \$3,000. They got it from a non-profit organization in San Francisco which makes scientific apparatus for educational institutions at cost. He gave me their address. They furnished and installed an identical one for us at a cost of \$3,575.77.

The Board of Education passed a resolution July 2, 1964 agreeing to construct the museum building upon receipt of funds. The plans were approved by the Board October 27, 1964. The building was completed in May 1966.

Clifford Roberts, Director of Audio-Visual Education, Alpena Public Schools, and Nancy Feindt, teacher of art, were appointed to operate the museum until a professional director could be secured. John Murphy, associated with the Denver, Colorado Museum, was hired as museum director January 15, 1967. His wife Cynthia (Cindy) was an unexpected bonus. She was hired as planetarium coordinator and assistant to Mr. Murphy. Her carefully planned and regularly scheduled planetarium programs for pupils at their respective grade levels, as well as programs for adults, were excellent.

The Board of Education established the Alpena Museum Lay Advisory Committee July 13, 1965, and appointed Dr. Russell H. Wilson to serve as president with the following committee members: Jesse Besser, Ralph Burns, Mrs. Robert Henderson, Mrs. Alex Kennedy, Lloyd MacConnell, Mrs. Philip Park, Fred R. Trelfa, and Dr. H. J. Burkholder. Carl Henry died December 13, 1966 and Mrs. Carl Henry was appointed in his place. The first meeting of the committee was held in the Board Room, Alpena High School, August 16, 7:30 p.m., 1965. Mrs. Alex Kennedy was elected secretary.

At a meeting held September 13, 1965 the committee adopted ten basic policies for Jesse Besser Museum operation, and recommended them to the Board of Education for adoption. The Board of Education adopted the policies as presented September 28, 1965. A copy of the policies is attached to this report. Lloyd MacConnell died April 7, 1970. His friends gave to the museum \$150.00 as a memorial to him.

The Murphys gave the museum a good start. However, some problems developed due to a number of reasons. The college kept trying to encroach into the museum building for non-museum classes etc. The dual administrative control by the college administration and the public school administration caused channels of communication to become confused and ineffective. This trouble became critical in 1968. Dr. Gene Geisert, Superintendent of Schools, in a telephone conversation with me to our Florida address in the morning of February 2, 1968 asked me to send him a statement he could use in discussing the dual control problem with the Board of Education. That afternoon I mailed him essentially the same statement as the Alpena Museum Lay Advisory Committee report of October 8, 1968 which appears on the next page.

Dr. Geisert's thinking was in line with the statements in my letter, but I never heard how the Board members reacted. The situation improved a little, and the operation of the museum limped along as best it could without a

straight line of administrative control. Museum Director Murphy's strong belief, amounting almost to paranoia, that a museum should not be operated by a school system, and his continuous efforts to create an organization separate from the school system did not help the situation. He carried his story to Mr. Besser on numerous occasions.

The problem was discussed at length at a meeting of the Alpena Museum Lay Advisory Committee October 8, 1969 on the basis of tentative statements prepared in advance for study before the meeting. After careful consideration, a motion was made to adopt the following statements relative to the background, purpose, and operation of Jesse Besser Museum, and copies be sent to the members of the Board of Education, and to the Superintendent of Schools. Motion carried.

Museum Lay Advisory Committee report to the Alpena Board of Education relative to administration of Besser Museum with particular reference to the status of the museum should Alpena Community College be organized into a separate district.

1. BACKGROUND. The Besser Museum fulfills a cultural and educational need which had been expressed on many occasions by Alpena people. Mr. Jesse Besser offered to donate a building if the Board of Education would accept it as part of the school system and operate it. The Board passed a resolution July 2, 1964 agreeing to construct the museum upon receipt of funds. Mr. Besser formed the Alpena Museum Association, a non-profit corporation, to finance the project, and to plan the building in cooperation with school officials. Contracts were let October 27, 1964.
2. PURPOSE. The Jesse Besser Museum is a museum of history, science, and art serving Alpena and the Thunder Bay Region. It is a 'living and learning' museum for the purpose (as defined by the International Council of Museums) of preserving, studying, enhancing by various means, and, in particular, of exhibiting to the public for its enjoyment and instruction, historical, scientific, artistic, and technological collections. In addition to usual museum functions, this museum has completely equipped rooms for college and community art classes, a planetarium, and a Foucault pendulum. CONVERSION OF SPACE IN THE MUSEUM BUILDING TO GENERAL OFFICES, CLASSROOMS, OR OTHER PURPOSES NOT IN KEEPING WITH THE PURPOSE OF THIS MUSEUM SHOULD NOT BE PERMITTED.

3. OPERATION. The Alpena Museum Association gave the museum to Alpena Public Schools to insure that it would be operated in accordance with best museum practice under the guidance of a professional museum director and staff; to insure its continued operation as a tax-supported institution; and to insure that it would adequately supplement the educational program of Alpena Public Schools. From September 1967 to June 1968 a total of 9,655 from local public and parochial schools and schools outside the Alpena system received, planned for their respective grades, instruction in the planetarium.

The museum director should have full responsibility for the operation and control of the building subject to general policies adopted by the Board of Education, and should be responsible to the Superintendent of Schools. The present system of lines of communication from the museum involving both college channels and general public school administrative channels is not efficient.

4. COMMUNITY COLLEGE REORGANIZATION. In the event that Alpena Community College should be reorganized into a separate district with other counties, the Board of Education should retain ownership and control of the museum. It is ideally located on the college campus to serve the college, elementary through high school, and the general public. Boundries of the space occupied by the museum building, future additions, outdoor exhibits, parking, etc., should be defined now. The art rooms should be made available to the new college district on terms established by the Board of Education. The general services of the museum should be extended to the college.

In January, 1970, Mr. Besser initiated a study by Carl Reitz, Secretary of Besser Foundation, Richard Boyce, Attorney, and Norm Foster, Business Manager, Alpena Public Schools, of the relationship between Flint Art Institute and the Flint Public Schools which were furnishing the building, and the operating expense with the Institute's Board of Trustees managing the operation. This action started some thinking about the possibility of a lease from the Alpena Board of Education to some organization.

A Xerox copy of committee report dated January 22, 1970 as submitted by Carl Reitz to Mr. Besser will be found on the next two pages. Mr. Besser's signed approval on this report shows his deep interest in proper operation of the museum, and his willingness to assume almost the entire museum expense of operation.

Mr. Murphy sent invitations to approximately 45 persons to attend a meeting in May, 1970, to create an organization to take over the Jesse Besser Museum. Twenty persons attended and listened to Mr. Murphy.

There was little or no discussion. No decisions were made. The general opinion of those present was that there was no need to form a new organization while the present Alpena Museum Association, a registered non-profit corporation with all necessary museum powers, was still in operation.

On July 1, 1970 the Board of Education leased the museum building and premises within the boundaries surveyed by Scott Engineering Co. and stipulated in the lease. The Association is given complete control over the operation including hiring of personnel. The lease is for three years subject to renewal. The Besser Foundation Board of Trustees, of which I am a member, agreed to give the Association the necessary funds to meet the yearly operating budget which has to be approved by the Foundation Board. The Board of Education is responsible for exterior maintenance; interior maintenance of heating system, air conditioning equipment, and plumbing; care and maintenance of landscaping; and snow removal. The Association agrees to operate the Jesse Besser Museum in a professional manner in accordance with sound museum practices.

The Alpena Museum Association Board of Directors now consists of Dr. Russell H. Wilson, president, Philip M. Park, President of Besser Company, vice president, and Ralph I. Burns, Postmaster, secretary-treasurer. (Fred Trelfa resigned October 31, 1968 to devote more time to historical writing).

The current Board of Education was in office when we negotiated the lease. It consists of Albert H. Nickels, president, Victor Werth, vice president, Mrs. Lois Reagan, treasurer, and Trustees Maynard N. Cohen, H. Ralph Diethelm, Frederick I. Eggen, C. S. White. Mrs. Marjorie E. Cogswell is Secretary to the Board, and Lawrence F. McConnell is Superintendent of Schools.

At a meeting held September 28, 1970, the Museum Association Board of Directors adopted general policies under which the Jesse Besser Museum is to be operated. These policies include I. Definition of Purpose, II. The policies adopted by the Board of Education September 28, 1965, III. Educational Program, IV. Museum Director. Outlines the duties and responsibilities of the director. A copy of the minutes of that meeting containing the policies is attached to this report.

John Murphy resigned effective May 15, 1971 for reasons of health and accepted a position in Kingman, Arizona. Mrs. Murphy stayed with us until June 15. Operation of the museum from July 1, 1970 under authority of the Alpena Museum Association Board of Directors demonstrated that operation under single authority is more pleasant, satisfying, and efficient than under the previous dual control. We hired Peter W. Cook as Director, and Eugene A. Jenneman as Planetarium Coordinator in June. They are excellent young men, and the future of the museum looks good.

The following is a brief statement showing in round numbers the cost of the building and equipment, and the source of the funds given to the Board of Education to make the necessary payments.

Total cost of building and equipment	\$895,000
Source of the funds:	
Besser Fund	654,000
Alpena Museum Association with appropriation from Besser Fund	37,000
Planetarium donations	21,000
State and Federal matching funds	<u>183,000</u>
	\$895,000

In addition to the Besser Fund gifts listed above, the exchange of property with Habitant Fence Inc. cost the Besser Fund through the Alpena Museum Association \$148,000. This amount is not part of the cost

of the museum because it was not built on the former Habitant Fence Inc. site. However, getting the factory out of the Community College campus was a magnificent gift to the Board of Education. A professional landscaping plan has been developed involving planting 100 trees, and many shrubs. The work will be done over a three-year period beginning next week. The Community College forester will direct the work, and it will be an educational program for his students. The Besser Fund is financing the operation.

In an address I gave to Alpena Rotary Club July 17, 1965 about the Jesse Besser Museum, and which was printed in full in The Alpena News, I pointed out that it is a regional museum covering primarily Alpena and the Thunder Bay Region, but extending within reasonable bounds into close neighboring areas. The fact that it is a regional museum places a limitation upon collections. The following paragraphs relating to museum collections are taken from the conclusion of that address.

A regional museum has a unique opportunity possessed by no other museum or organization. By exhibiting materials from the collections it may demonstrate the individuality of the community it serves in an intimate, authentic manner which can not possibly be achieved by a museum, no matter how large, in another community. This distinctive feature will stimulate the interest of citizens in the museum and will aid visitors to understand the community. In other words, the collections should be definitely related to this area.

The second limitation the regional museum should place upon its collections is subject matter as it relates to any one of the three divisions of the museum. Part of the ground floor of our museum is dedicated to the fine arts, and is combined with the art department of Alpena Community College. The collections should illustrate the aesthetic interests and accomplishments of the citizens.

Probably the major interest of our museum will be the historical collections which should reflect the story of the developments and achievements of the community. The natural history collections should epitomize the geology and geography, and the natural environment and resources of the region.

The third limitation which should be placed upon collections is that of function. A museum collects objects for only two reasons. First, it is a repository for objects which must be preserved because of their aesthetic, historic or scientific importance. Such objects must be fully documented, that is, their history, in the greatest possible detail must be on record, otherwise their value for scholars and students is lost. Secondly, the museum is a storehouse for materials which have educational usefulness. These are typical and often commonplace objects, again accurately identified and documented, which may be used to demonstrate physical characteristics, associations, principles, or processes. Many items in the collection may belong to both categories. In general, the museum should have collections which illustrate the changes in our way of life from pioneer days to the present.

Obviously the museum should not accept materials which can not be used. Rather than accept such articles and later throw them away, museum officials should express thanks for the offer and explain why it is impossible to accept.

" The heart of the museum is its collections. It can not be a museum without permanent collections, and the manner in which they are cared for and used by the museum, determines its standing among other museums, and its prestige in the community. The organization, the management and the activities of the museum exist solely to insure the continuous adequate care of the materials in the collections and their effective use for cultural and educational purposes. The first obligation of a museum is to recognize and assume the responsibilities inherent in the possession of its collections, which are held in trust for the benefit of the present and future citizens of the community." - from " So You Want a Good Museum"