



LAKE FOREST-LAKE BLUFF HISTORICAL SOCIETY
PRESENTS

A TOUR OF
Albert Lasker's Mill Road Farm

JUNE 27, 2009

Welcome! The Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society is pleased to bring this unprecedented tour to you. The Albert Lasker Estate has everything you could want in the country life — a grand estate designed by an exceptional architect, beautiful gardens, a gentleman farm run for fun, and the premier leisure sport of the era, golf.

The homeowners of these spectacular properties deserve our gratitude for sharing their homes and histories with us. I thank them for their generous hospitality. I would like to thank co-chairs Coni Carfagno and Katie Hale. They took an idea for a program and turned it into reality. Thanks also to the many volunteers who made this tour possible, especially Ron Kempner, whose enthusiasm for this estate is inspiring. Also inspiring is the amount of support that local merchants and Northern Trust give to local organizations. Thank you for supporting this program with both funding and in-kind donations.

This tour is one program among many that the Historical Society offers during the year. I encourage you to join us for future tours, programs and exhibits. Becoming a member is the best way to not only show your commitment to preserving our heritage, but also to receive the latest news about what is going on. Members receive first notices about our exciting programs, discount admissions and invitations to previews of our exhibits.

Enjoy this slice of life from the past. It is your opportunity to relive the "country life" of a bygone era.

— JANICE HACK
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR
LAKE FOREST-LAKE BLUFF HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Cover Photo: Courtesy of the Nielsen Family & The Western Golf Association

THE HISTORY OF MILL ROAD FARM

What remains of the Gentleman Farm once owned by Albert D. Lasker is located in west Lake Forest, formally called Everett, in Vernon Township. The 480-acre estate occupied ground from Route 22 to Everett Road, and from Telegraph Road to about 200 feet west of where the Toll Road/294 is today. The original entrance to The Farm was off Old Mill Road, where the gatehouse sits today.

The Farm, with its main house and 26 outbuildings, was constructed at a cost of \$3.5 million. In today's dollars, it would probably be close to \$450 million. At a time in American history when grandiose expenditures by moguls and plutocrats were admired, Albert Lasker embraced that spirit. He was an amazingly successful businessman. That said, Mill Road Farm cost him comparatively little in actual outlay; he had bought a large amount of RCA stock, which rose fantastically and paid for most of the estate.

The project took three years to complete and was the work of David Adler, the master architect of the late Country Place Era. The large manor home was designed in the grand 17th century French architecture style. With 32,000 square feet and 55 rooms, the U-shaped structure features a large front courtyard with a fountain and elm trees lining the center court.

Great attention was paid to the design and construction of the outbuildings as well. Most of the structures were built of white-washed brick and plaster with blue-grey shutters, red tile roofs and red awnings. The gutters and down spouts were copper. It was said that it took a carload of copper nails to do the tiled roofs. The 26 outbuildings included the gate house, the general managers house, the guest house, a calving shed, a pair of cow barns, a milk shed for cooling milk, a cow barn used for grain to feed the cattle, the dovecotes, the recreation house or cocktail lounge, two pool cabanas, the theater, the eight-car garage, the coach house, the orangerie, the gardener's cottage, the pump house, the club house, the superintendent's house, three pony barns, chicken houses, the greenhouses, two maintenance buildings and a log cabin that was the children's playhouse. Of these, 16 still exist.

In its day, Mill Road Farm had been referred to as an "American Chantilly," often considered one of the 10 most beautiful estates in the United States. To the Lasker family, it was just "The Farm." Adler ensured that the estate was elegant and comfortable. The Laskers, usually in residence from May through Labor Day, wanted an atmosphere of comfort and relaxation for entertaining their family and friends.

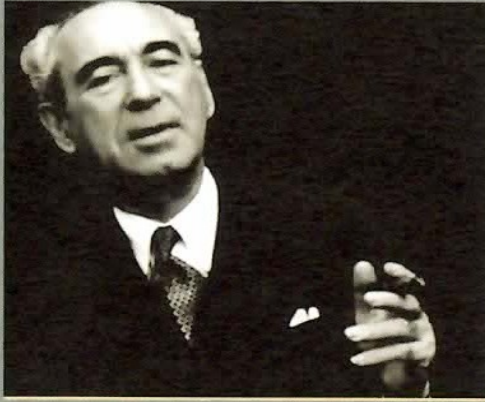
This was a working farm with all the amenities of a fine club. Large horse barns housed stables for polo ponies and a prize herd of Guernsey cows were imported from Europe. Adler designed a chicken coop for 2,000 chickens. Lasker was proud to offer his unequalled cream, milk and eggs delivered fresh from Mill Road Farm.

On the western end of the estate, Lasker had his own 18-hole private golf course designed by one of the most notable golf architects of his day, William Flynn. The golf course was the main motivation behind building the estate. At a cost of \$1,000,000 to design and execute, the course was completed in 1925 and quickly reduced in size from 7,100 yards (enormous by 1920's standards) to 6,557 yards. Par was 70 on this challenging, nationally recognized course.

One hundred acres of formally landscaped gardens were designed by influential New York landscape architect James Greenleaf. Six miles of clipped hedges hugged the winding lanes of Mill Road Farm. Until portable generators could provide electricity for electric clippers, it took a crew of six men working constantly to keep the hedges properly trimmed. Greenleaf favored a more natural planting scheme — he wanted the overall landscape to give the impression of driving through a forest glade. More formal design was saved for the magnificent allées. The grand landscaping plan resulted in two years of planting at a cost of around \$100,000. The garden staff at its peak numbered 35 men outside and three men for the greenhouses.

By 1939, Lasker decided to give up Mill Road Farm. His wife, Flora, had died suddenly in 1936 and it had greatly affected him. Gone were the days of big lavish country estates and the lifestyle that went with it. Lasker maintained the property primarily as a club rather than a home. A brief second marriage was followed by his third marriage to a woman who encouraged him to experience new areas of interest. Lasker had begun to see the estate and his grandiose life as an anachronism, stating, "Mill Road is the kind of place that is going to be surrounded by an angry mob someday. They'll say, 'Let's get the so and so that built this place.' When that happens, I intend to be a member of the mob."

Lasker was advised to donate The Farm rather than try to sell it. He gave the entire property to The University of Chicago with the stipulation that it be maintained for two years. The university explored many ideas for how to use the property, including as a museum or public golf course, for botanical research and public garden grounds or as an assembly place for scholars. With the advent of World War II, not having found a way to utilize the property and considering it a financial drain, the university closed the estate and the land was sold off lot by lot. In 1943, the main house sold for just \$110,000.



ALBERT LASKER

Photo courtesy of June Steele

Albert Lasker, "the Father of Modern Advertising," started construction of Mill Road Farm in 1926 when he was almost 50 years old. His financial success was considerable. He had started in advertising at the Chicago firm of Lord & Thomas at \$10 a week and purchased the firm when he was 20 years old. Lasker remained its head until he retired 44 years later. Lasker earned a reputed \$45 million in his career. Lord & Thomas became an empire by employing a staff of copywriters who turned out radio commercials and advertising copy for such products as Lucky Strike ("Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet"), Sunkist oranges, Schlitz ("The beer that made Milwaukee famous"), Pepsodent Toothpaste, Kimberly-Clark ("Don't put a cold in your pocket"), Palmolive ("Keep that schoolgirl complexion") and Studebaker automobiles.

A complex man, he had a vital and charismatic personality and traveled in powerful circles. In addition to a life-long interest in national politics, Lasker was an avid sports fan. Baseball was a game he knew and loved. With a major interest in the Chicago Cubs, Lasker helped bring in the first Commissioner of Baseball and was instrumental in naming Cubs ballpark Wrigley Field after his good friend and business partner William Wrigley. By the late 20's, Lasker set his sights on golf. His desire to build the best private course initially drove the whole idea of Mill Road Farm.

At the peak of his business success, Lasker's life took a different path as he devoted himself to art and the expansion of medical research. Until his death in 1952, Lasker remained active in politics and philanthropy. He and his third wife established the Albert and Mary Lasker Foundation to support medical research. Largely through their efforts, the National Institute of Health was established in 1946.



DAVID ADLER

David Adler (1882-1949) is considered to be one of the most revered architects designing homes during a period known as that of the "Great American House." Born in Milwaukee, Adler studied at Princeton and the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. After a brief stint working in the offices of noted country-house architect Howard Van Doren Shaw, Adler formed his own firm. He partnered first with an Ecole des Beaux-Arts-trained architect named Henry Dangler, and then with former Shaw associate Robert Work. These associations were a necessity because even as Adler was becoming one of America's leading domestic architects, he would not receive his formal license to practice until 1929.

Adler's Chicago firm designed homes for wealthy clients throughout the United States, with a large concentration of those estates in the Chicago area. Adler's great talent was his ability to combine the grandeur of European classicism with country comfort. His unique interpretations of different architectural styles were always paired with spectacular garden landscapes. The Farm, with its vast landscaping and all of its Adler-designed out-buildings, was the quintessential Gentleman's Farm.



FRANCIS ELKINS

David Adler's sister, Francis Elkins (1888-1953), designed the interior of Lasker's French manor home. Sharing the gift of superb taste, Elkins often worked with her brother while she promoted a thriving private design business of her own. As a result, the original interiors of Albert and Flora Lasker's home were the work of one of the most celebrated interior designers of the 20th century. Elkins' credo

was "to always make the man comfortable," something she succeeded in doing as she scoured Europe for antique flooring, paneling, wallpaper and furniture. After one of her "orgies of buying" in Paris, Lasker took one look at a bill for over \$150,000 and put a stop to the buying. Eventually the commission, which was one of her most ambitious, was completed.



THE HOMES *(The homes are numbered to correspond with the map located at back of program)*

1. THE GATE LODGE, (GATEHOUSE), 1450 West Old Mill Road

Photo from the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Collection

The main drive for the estate ran from the gatehouse for about 1/3 of a mile north and then swung west toward the main house. The head gardener, Robert Brydon, and his wife lived here. Brydon was brought over from Scotland to work with Adler on the reparation of the farm's soil for the layout of gardens and trees. It was Brydon who created the topiary garden out of rare Chinese elms.

2. THE MEN'S DORMITORY, 1551 West Old Mill Road

Photo from the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Collection

Originally, there were rooms for eight to 10 single men and a separate apartment for a married couple who cared for the men and the dorm. Lasker, the largest single employer in Lake Forest, had a staff of 50 to maintain the gardens, the main house, the golf course and the farm. Most of the estate workers commuted in from Highwood.



3. THE TACK HOUSE, 1632 West Old Mill Road

Photo courtesy of Ron Kempner

The tack house was used to store hay feed and keep the saddles. Around the outside of the house there are rings bolted to the exterior to which the horses would be tied.

4. THE HORSE BARN, 1628 West Old Mill Road

Photo courtesy of Ron Kempner

The mirror image twin of 1570 Estate Lane. The two buildings used to be part of a "U"-shaped barn. The buildings were divided in 1946.



5. THE HORSE BARN, 1570 Estate Lane

Photo courtesy of Ron Kempner

The building is the twin of 1628 West Old Mill Road.

Lasker's son Edward had polo ponies. Edward's love of horses was fostered by his father's good friend John Hertz, the creator of the Yellow Cab Company. Hertz owned and raced thoroughbreds — winning the Kentucky Derby in 1928 with his colt Reign Court. Edward's interest in horses spurred Albert Lasker into buying several of Hertz's brood mares.



6. THE FARM MANAGER'S HOME, 1590 Estate Lane

Photo from the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Collection

This home was occupied from 1928 to 1942 by Cyril A. Tregillus, the proficient estate manager. In 1928, Lasker was at his Miami home when Tregillus and his family arrived to move into their home. Lasker had just found out that Adler had spent \$22,000 on the building – and put a stop on all the work orders. The Farm Manager's home was not completed – Tregillus himself had to finish the wiring and install light switches.

Tregillus became invaluable to the estate, having a hand in almost every aspect of Old Mill Farm – everything from plant research, hiring, design negotiation and entertainment to the business of running a working farm. He helped expand Lasker's real estate holdings by acting as an advisor and eventually became a good friend to Lasker. Tregillus wrote in great detail about his tenure with the Laskers in a book titled *Reminiscences*. In 1942, Tregillus became the procurement chief of the Metallurgical Laboratory at The University of Chicago. It was the forerunner of the Manhattan District of the Army Corps of Engineers and the producer of the atomic bomb.



7. THE COW BARN, 1558 Estate Lane

Photo from the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Collection

This barn was on the property when Lasker purchased the farm. Adler remodeled it, adding individual drinking fountains to the stalls. Some of the Guernsey cows were purchased locally and an additional train car full of the prize breeding stock was shipped in from the Island of Guernsey. A.H. Hulse was hired by the Laskers as their herdsman.



8. THE MILK HOUSE, 1536 Estate Lane

Photo from the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Collection

Set near the road, this rectangular building housed the milking operation. The Lasker's had test milkers that would milk certain cows three times per day. There were trials for milk and butterfat production. The cool basement was used for storage. As this was a working farm, the rich, unpasteurized milk, cream and eggs were sold in Highland Park at a price above average.



9. THE DOVECOTES, 1522 Estate Lane

Photo from the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Collection

Originally there were three structures, all stucco-washed brick and octagonal in form with bell-shaped, hipped roofs.

A dovecote is a building intended to house pigeons or doves. Throughout history, the possession of a dovecote was seen as a symbol of status and power.



10. THE COCKTAIL HOUSE, 1438 Estate Lane

Photo courtesy of Ron Kempner

The crescent shaped building with its four curved stainless steel and bronze doors was designed for more informal entertaining. Typically, lunch was served here. The building had draft beer on tap and its own ice cream bar and soda fountain. The home boasts two-foot thick brick walls and its tall French windows faced east towards the pool while the west side faced the topiary garden. This pavilion was built after the topiary garden was created by head gardener John Brydon using rare Chinese elms that were trimmed into birds, loveseats, globes, cubes and wishing wells.



11. THE POOL AND CABANAS, 1436 Estate Lane

Photo courtesy of the Nielsen family

Mr. Greenleaf's grand 100-foot wide allée flowed down from the main house and offered a view south from the swimming pool to an open field with dairy barns beyond. Twin bathhouses flanked the 100 x 40 foot swimming pool. The pool held 186,000 gallons of water, which was supplied by the Lake Forest water main. The estate's well water contained too much iron. The statues still standing once overlooked it all.

In 1960, the 1-1/2 story single family home was built on the site of the estate pool. The original pool walls were used for the foundation.



12. THE MAIN HOUSE - "FLORA'S GARDEN"

Photo from the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Collection

Designed in the style of a French Norman chateau, the main house took three years to build, from 1925 to 1928. As with the other buildings on the estate, the exterior brick was originally white-washed. The house has three-dozen rooms with 13 bathrooms and 10 fireplaces. In the early 30's, the structure was retrofitted with one of the first whole-house air conditioning systems.

Flora Lasker and Francis Elkins worked closely together to choose antique paneling, flooring and wallpaper, as well as exquisite French furniture and fixtures. The domestic staff included a head butler, two under butlers, cook, kitchen maid, laundress, houseman, watchman, lady's maid for Mrs. Lasker, a companion for daughter Francis, and two chauffeurs. Daily staff was added as needed.

Flora Lasker had the house filled with fresh flowers every day. The intimate garden just outside the living room wall was named for her.



13. THE THEATER HOUSE, 1355 Estate Lane

Photo from the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Collection

Built during the winter of 1930, this multi-purpose building included a kitchen and a game room as well as an auditorium. Theater architects Rapp and Rapp were hired to do the interior. The building had the latest RCA equipment and 24 large upholstered chairs in addition to three-dozen gold ballroom chairs. The stage in the recreation house was large enough to hold a 10-piece band. The building was even air-conditioned!

The grand opening was May 1, 1931 – Albert Lasker’s 51st birthday – and featured a movie starring George Arliss and Bette Davis. A projectionist from a Chicago theater got \$30.00 per show to bring new releases to The Farm. When Lasker was in residence, movies were shown every Wednesday, Saturday and Sunday. A dozen or more friends would join the Laskers. A typical evening’s entertainment was the showing of a cartoon followed by a double feature.



14. THE GARDENER'S HOUSE, 1213 Estate Lane

Photo from the Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society Collection

There were two bench houses, each 30-35 feet long, with a 20x20 foot display room connecting them. Wings at each end were used for fruit, one for grapes and the other for peaches and nectarines. The potting shed joined the greenhouses with sleeping quarters for two men above. A 50-foot building was constructed behind the greenhouses. This structure had a special section just for orchids.

The current home has its original David Adler entry and the garage has been converted into an artist's studio. The concrete foundations of the green house and some of the walkways are still visible today.



15. THE GARAGE HOUSE, 1221 Estate Lane

Photo courtesy of the Nielsen family

The eight-car garage had two apartments on the second floor. Lasker employed two chauffeurs, one who traveled with the family and one who was employed only for the duration of their summer vacations at the farm. Lasker kept a big seven-passenger Hudson. Adler designed a South African-style garage, a sub-theme to the 17th century French provincial style of the manor house. The three-car garage is a much later addition to the property.



16. THE GOLF CLUBHOUSE AND CADDY SHACK,

1036 Estate Lane *Photo courtesy of the Nielsen family*

Originally a farmhouse, the residence was remodeled in 1926 by Adler as a clubhouse with locker rooms and showers in the basement. Adler also added the caddy shack. A later addition connects the two buildings. The backyard of the home is actually part of the 18th hole.

The golf course was the pride of Mill Road Farm. Lasker sent complimentary membership cards to his friends. Play was unlimited and guests could bring friends twice each season. The golf course maintenance crew numbered 9-15 men. The course was dauntingly difficult with unusually long holes and wickedly placed sand traps. Lasker had a \$500 standing bet that no visitor could break par. In 1934, Tommy Armour, the 1927 U.S. Open Champion broke par with a 69. Lasker typically shot around 100.

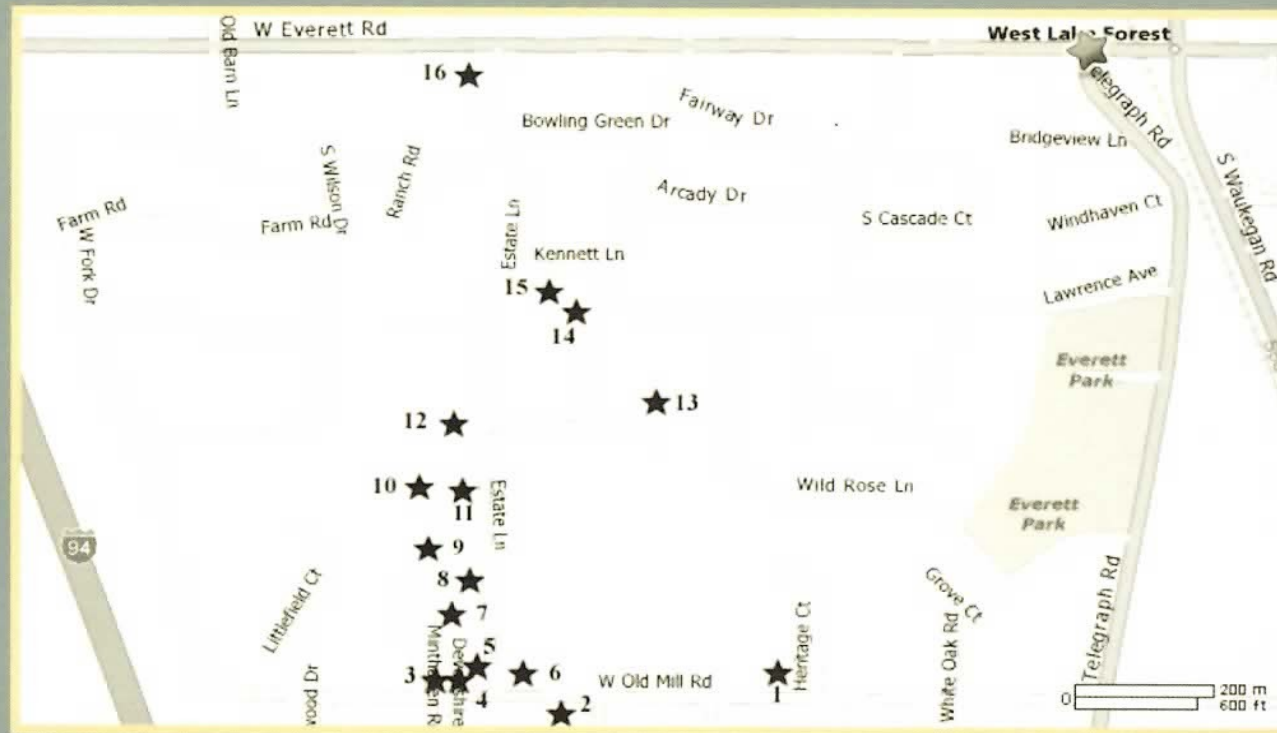
Gene Sarazen called it "a championship course and definitely the best kept course in the country." More than 50 experimental grasses were tested, "Virginia Bent" was chosen. Bright green dye was sprayed on any grass that had the nerve to go brown.

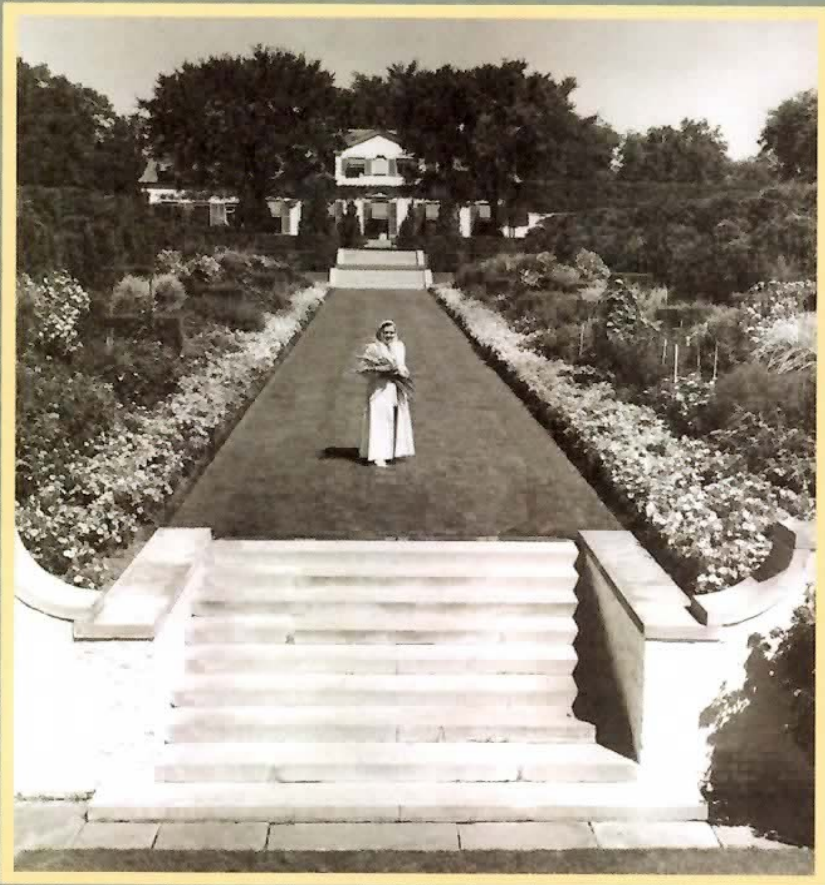
Bob Hope and Bing Crosby struck radio deals with Lasker's agency – then made the drive up from the city to play the course. Regular visitors included Gene Tunney, the heavyweight boxing champion of 1926-1928, Vice President Charles Curtis, William Paley, Babe Didrickson and golf legend Bobby Jones.

At the clubhouse, Lasker regularly entertained 12 or so of his closest friends who called themselves the "Partridges." A typical get-together after golf would be lunch and poker.

Even today, historians look back on the short-lived course as one of the best and toughest layouts in American golf.

NUMBERED MAP OF "THE FARM"





WE GRATEFULLY ACKNOWLEDGE THE FOLLOWING SOURCES:

Albert Davis Lasker "The Father of Modern Advertising" by Walter Roth

Article from Chicago Jewish History, summer, 2006

Classic Country Estates of Lake Forest, Architecture and Landscape Design by Kim Coventry, Daniel Meyer, and Arthur Miller

David Adler, Architect: The Elements of Style by Richard Guy Wilson

Francis Elkins Interior Design by Stephen M. Salny

Reminiscences by Cyril A. Tregillus

Taken at the Flood by John Gunther

Pioneer Press: June Steele, research

Carol Champ, notes from Taken at the Flood

The Lake Forest-Lake Bluff Historical Society offers thanks to
all the homeowners, docents and volunteers!



LAKE FOREST-LAKE BLUFF HISTORICAL SOCIETY

631 East Westminster

Lake Forest

847-234-5253

www.lflbhistory.org