



Berkley History & Museum Happenings

March 2023



In 1971, new 'Welcome to Berkley' signs were erected after 'We Care' was adopted as the official city motto.

-Presented by Berkley Public Works

One of the First "Berkley, We Care," Signs & Its Commemorative Plaque



Sears Catalog Homes of Berkley

April 12, at 6:30 PM

Berkley Public Library

Join Andrew and Wendy Mutch, Sears house owners, as they present the fascinating history of the "Sears Modern Homes" program. You'll learn how Berkley homeowners ordered, financed, and built their own "Sears Modern Homes." The presentation includes a photographic tour of Sears houses located throughout Berkley. Register at the Berkley Public Library website.

Berkley "WE CARE"
by Don Callihan

Preface

On Monday, January 4, 1971, the Berkley City Council passed its first resolution of the new year, the city's official motto: We Care. The Council noted: "It is the intent of this City Council to be responsive to the needs of the citizens of Berkley so that every individual has an opportunity to realize his greatest potential." In researching this article, I was surprised by the council's statement. I always interpreted the motto as we care about each other, which is how I will tell the story.

The Story

When the United States entered World War II after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, men and boys nationwide answered the call to avenge the assault. One of those was Clare Leonard, a 31-year-old Detroit worker as a bellboy at the Wardell Hotel (now the Park Shelton Condominiums) on E. Kirby Street at Woodward. Clare enlisted in the Army on February 12, 1942, and became a member of the Army Air Force. After training, he was sent to an airfield near Earls Colne, Colchester, UK, and eventually to other airfields on the Continent. He completed over 80 missions as a B-26 Marauder gunner and crew chief and was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross and eight Air Medals.

While in the UK, he met his future wife, Peggy Ada Lamb, at Newmarket, in 1944. After VE-Day, Clare was sent back to the United States, where he was discharged on July 14, 1945. He returned to the UK in early 1946 and married Peggy on March 16. Clare came back to the United States with his new bride on December 29, 1946, and moved in with his mother, Kate, who lived in Detroit.

On July 17, 1947, the couple's first child, Susan Jean, was born. A little over a year later, their second child, Linda Kay, joined her sister. The couple dreamed of having their own house and put money aside for that purpose. Their dream came to fruition in early 1950 when their meager savings and financing through the GI Bill allowed them to purchase a small two-bedroom home at 3920 Phillips in Berkley. They were living the American Dream.

The Crash

In an instant, that dream became a nightmare. The family was returning home at 1:05 a.m. on Sunday, November 26, 1951, after visiting with Clare's

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brother Ralph and his family. Clare was driving his 1940 Plymouth 2-door sedan east on 12 Mile Road when he slowed to make a left turn onto Phillips. Instantly, the Leonard automobile was struck from behind by a 34-year-old Berkley woman, and immediately burst into flames.

Clare, Peggy, and Linda were all in the front seat and escaped the burning automobile, but Susan was in the back and could not. Clare was desperately trying to rescue her when Angelo Calas, who lived in a nearby apartment and had heard the crash, came to help. He told *The Daily Tribune*, "I was upstairs when I heard the crash. All I saw were flames. The mother and one child were lying in the road, and I helped the father try to get the little girl out. The driver's door was stuck, so I rushed to the other side and managed to get her out. She was standing up by the dashboard with her hair on fire and screaming. It was awful. I patted the fire out in her hair and took her out." Calas suffered burns to his hands and arms.

The Hospital

Susan was taken to the closest major medical facility, Mount Carmel Mercy Hospital in Detroit. Doctors were not sure that she would make it through the night. She had second and third-degree burns to her head, face, and left hand, and her lungs were filled with fluid caused by inhaling the hot air from the fire. With blood transfusions to increase her overall body fluids and stimulate blood flow, she survived, but her condition was listed as critical.

In talking about the accident a few days later and thinking about her time in Suffolk, during the war, Peggy said, "We used to live near an airport. One day a buzz bomb exploded about a hundred yards from my home. It tore half the building apart, but it didn't seem as bad as that accident."

Susan underwent her first skin graft on December 15, three weeks after the accident, the first of many.

We Care

Almost immediately, the people of Berkley displayed their "We Care" attitude. Susan was initially given five pints of blood that the hospital wanted to have replaced. Clare and Peggy appealed to the community through *The Daily Tribune*, and within days 47 pints of blood had been donated, mainly from Berkley residents.

The Leonards' automobile was destroyed in the accident, and Clare, an apprentice barber, could not work because of burns to his hands. The couple thus had neither transportation nor money. A neighbor offered to loan them an automobile; others presented them with \$245 collected in the neighborhood.

The people of Berkley responded. On Sunday, December 16, 1951, Robert Burns, Commander of Berkley American Legion Post 374, called civic, church, and service groups to a meeting at the city hall where the Susan Leonard Trust Fund Association was created. Police Chief Frank Irons was named its treasurer and would disburse funds for Susan's skin grafting and plastic surgery. The association included 20 of Berkley's clubs and church groups, with each asked to hold an event to raise money for Susan. The goal was \$20,000.

Almost immediately, fundraising events began to happen. The Berkley Lions Club was the first organization to sponsor an event, a Christmas tree sale with all proceeds going to the trust fund. They raised \$706. The Berkley Schools sponsored a Donate-for-Susan Day during which school children could donate their nickels and dimes to help the family. \$653.21 was collected.

Christmas

As Christmas approached, Peggy discussed their Christmas plans before the accident. It was to have been their best Christmas to date. Clare

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105 mm Howitzer

The Porchlight Campaign

Thanks to the imagination of Richard G. Current, a member of the Fellowcraft Club, Berkley Masonic Lodge #536, the most successful of all fundraising events, a porchlight drive, took place on Tuesday, January 15, 1952. Current and other members of the Fellowcraft Club recruited volunteers for every block of Berkley who would collect donations from every house with a lit porchlight. Current's original idea for kicking off the event and reminding everyone to turn on their porchlights was to fire aerial bombs, a firework launched from the ground that flashes and bangs, over each of the six sections of the city. However, when he set out to procure the aerial bombs, he discovered they were unavailable and illegal.

Looking for an alternative, he wrote a letter to then-Michigan Governor G. Mennen Williams who found a solution. Governor Williams arranged for the signal starting the drive to be provided by the 177th Field Artillery Battalion from the Detroit Artillery Armory.

At about 5 p.m., two National Guard trucks, each pulling a 105-millimeter Howitzer, pulled into the field behind Berkley High School. The guns were unhitched from the trucks and set up on the school ground, one facing east and one facing west. Each was loaded with black powder shells, no projectile, and was simultaneously fired five times at 6 p.m.

The city lit up like a Christmas tree as almost every home's porchlight was turned on simultaneously. To add to the excitement, a National Guard aircraft circled the city during the drive, illuminated by ground-based searchlights. The volunteers took their donation jars from door to door and, in one hour, collected \$5505. It was believed to be the first drive of its type ever held in South Oakland County.



Susan

Linda

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was beginning to do well as a barber, and Peggy had taken in laundry to make some extra money. For the first time, they managed to save some money for presents. With few funds available immediately after the accident, their Christmas savings quickly disappeared.

However, Peggy did not dwell on misfortune; she said, “We have so much to be thankful for. They told us at Mt. Carmel hospital when Susan was first taken there that it seemed impossible she could live for more than 12 hours. But people were most generous in giving blood, and now we feel a miracle has happened.”

Even though the Leonards’ money was gone, the people of Berkley saw that the family had the best Christmas possible. The Berkley Flower Shop provided a tree for Susan’s hospital room, and Dinser’s Greenhouse on Greenfield provided the decorations. On the Sunday before Christmas, Santa arrived with his toy sack over his shoulder. Placing it on the floor beside Susan’s bed, he gave her a pair of fuzzy slippers, blocks, a doll, and the best gift of all, a table-top doll house complete with furniture in every room. Susan used her good hand to manipulate some of the furniture and then said, “Thank you, Santa,” the only thing she said while Santa was there.

More Fundraisers

The new year brought more fundraisers. The Berkley Masonic Fellowcraft Club conducted a porchlight drive that brought in \$5505 (see Porchlight Campaign on page 2), and Betsy Ross Council 11, Daughters of the American Revolution, raised \$292.98. Another group sponsored a play.

When the fund had swelled to more than \$11,000, Peggy expressed her gratitude and felt that enough had been raised for Susan. She said, “I think we should draw the line. I don’t feel we should ask any more. . . People have done more for us than I ever hoped or dreamed, and we can help ourselves a lot more than we have.”

The Unthinkable

And then the unthinkable happened. On the morning of Saturday, March 1, 1952, Susan was to be taken to the operating room for more skin grafting. This procedure had occurred every Saturday since December 15. Before being taken, she was given a sleep-inducing drug. Peggy said she was talking with her as the drug took effect, and then Susan just stopped breathing. It was a shock to Peggy, the medical staff, and the entire community. Expressing her dismay, Peggy said, “Just when things began to look better, but only the Lord knows. Maybe it was better. Maybe it was better.”

John Kaichen was the City Editor for *The Daily Tribune* and the reporter who, with his regular updates, had done more than anybody else to personalize the struggle of this little four-year-old girl and the family that loved her so dearly. A week before Susan’s death, John wrote, “Last Tuesday this reporter visited Susan. The Saturday before, skin had been taken from her buttocks. She couldn’t sit down. She walked and ran, lay flat on her stomach, moved to her knees, twisted in all sorts of contortions to watch the television set – even upside down – but couldn’t sit down. Even then, she had improved remarkably. The new skin on her face was moving for the first time when she smiled. And she talked to everybody.”

In the aftermath of Susan’s passing, Dr. Claire L. Straith, her plastic surgeon, said that he had learned much from treating Susan. Upon hearing his statement, Peggy said, “It makes me feel a little better to know that the whole thing, the whole, long suffering wasn’t for nothing.”

Susan’s funeral was on Wednesday, March 5, 1952, at the Trinity Lutheran Church in Berkley. John Kaichen was one of her pallbearers.

A Playroom at Beaumont

In total, \$14,079.25 was donated by Berkleyites and other South Oakland County groups and residents. After all hospital and doctor bills were paid, the Susan Leonard Fund had a balance of \$6748.41. The Leonards could have legally kept this money, but they donated it to the Oakland Hospital fund for a future playroom to memorialize Susan. Once built, the hospital was named in honor of Dr. William Beaumont, the father of gastric physiology.

A little more than a year after Susan’s passing, the Leonards were back at Mount Carmel Mercy Hospital, this time for a happy occasion, a new baby girl. The Leonards would go on to have two more children, another girl and a boy.

This is only one example of “Berkley, We Care.” *The Daily Tribune* and *The Berkley Advance* have documented many others. However, none has ever gripped the community like this one.

Author’s Note

I became the Leonards’ *Daily Tribune* carrier three months after Susan passed and delivered their newspaper for the next three years. However, my connection does not stop there.

When we moved into our Royal Oak neighborhood 45 years ago, my youngest son befriended twin boys who lived around the corner. I was surprised when I learned their mother was Linda, Susan’s sister. The twins had an older brother and a baby sister named Susan. At some point, the oldest boy became our *Tribune* carrier. The route passed through the family, and eventually, Susan was delivering our paper.

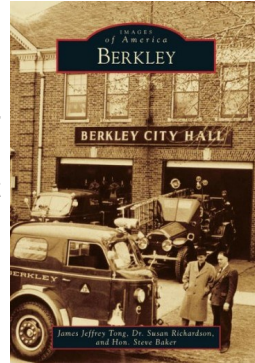
One Saturday while I was doing yard work, an older woman came down the street with the *Tribune* bag slung over her shoulder. It was Peggy. Susan could not deliver the paper that day, and Grandma was filling in. I told her, “I was your paperboy over 35 years ago. Who could have predicted that someday you would be delivering my paper?” We both had a good laugh. It truly is a small world.

The Museum Gift Shop

The museum gift shop has the perfect gift for that person with a Berkley connection. Selections include books about Berkley history, posters, banners, post cards and our Berkley Map prints

Books

Get your copy of *Images of America—Berkley*, by local historians, James Jeffrey Tong, Dr. Susan Richardson, Hon. Steve Baker. The book features local photos from pioneer-days up to the present. Get yours for \$20 at the Museum, the City Hall or the Library.



Business Card-Sized Magnets

Our refrigerator magnets are \$1 each, or get all 6 for \$5. Available at the Museum, the City Hall and the Library



Visit Us

Berkley Historical Museum
3338 Coolidge Highway
Berkley, MI 48072
248-658-3335
museum@berkleymich.net

Hours: Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM
Sun: 2 PM till 4 PM

Group tours by appointment.

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Donate Items of Historical Interest

If you have artifacts or historical photos that you wish to donate, stop by the museum or email: museum@berkleymich.net. Items should be clean and in restorable condition.

Become a Member

Do you enjoy history and/or the preservation of historical artifacts? If so, we have a place for you on the Berkley Historical Committee. We are an official committee of the City of Berkley dedicated to preserving and promoting its history. We educate and engage the public in our efforts through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum. If you wish to become an active member of this committee, send an email to museum@berkleymich.net indicating your interest, or call 248-658-3335 and leave a message.

Photo and Text Credits

The “Berkley—We Care” sign hangs in the Museum. The “Susan & Linda” photo was provided by Linda Dunmore, pictured in the photo with Susan. Howitzer photo from US Embassy—Luxemburg website. Historical information from *The Daily Tribune*, *The Berkley Advance* & Linda Dunmore.

The mission of the Berkley Historical Committee is to preserve and promote the history of the City of Berkley, Michigan, and to engage the public through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum.