

STATE HISTORY AWARD NOMINATION:

Diana E. Barrett & www.historygrandrapids.org, a virtual archive

For the past year Diana E. Barrett has lived, breathed, and slept in the cyber world. Her heroic efforts have led the Grand Rapids Historical Commission into the digital age, broadening its reach and adding to the range of materials it makes accessible on Grand Rapids history. Established by the city in 1962, the Commission's charge was to update the city's published record and to engage the community in the collection of source material. For forty-five years the GRHC documented the life of Grand Rapids using the print medium. Although during the past year it published *STRIKE: How the Furniture Strike of 1911 Changed Grand Rapids* and has recently supported video and oral history projects, including documentation of the Vietnamese community's history in Grand Rapids, the Commission has now emerged from a period of transition with the establishment of an innovative online archive. Its realization, from unique concept to functioning reality, has been energized and overseen by the multi-talented Diana Barrett.

Barrett's interest in history has taken her into some odd corners and extends far beyond her efforts for the Grand Rapids Historical Commission. Retired from life as a teacher, then financial broker, Barrett began her historical researches in genealogy and fast graduated into the calculus of that field. She discovered that entire communities moved, not just individuals. As she studied the trails communities moved along and the history of the areas they settled, Barrett gradually honed her skills as a researcher and writer by presenting at GVSU's Great Lakes History Conference, aiding research workshops for the Greater Grand Rapids Women's History Council, masterminding the establishment of an important database for the Grand Rapids Public Library, and generously aiding fellow laborers in their own research projects. The Commission web project has simply focussed her talents and kicked her into overdrive.

In a nutshell, the GRHC online archive developed by Barrett is an effort that locates, preserves, and makes digitally available photos and documents illustrating community history that generally are not donated to material archives but are retained by families and organizations. The GRHC is scanning images from the personal holdings of local families, the archives of area public and private institutions, and other local sources that reveal the ways in which Grand Rapids people worked, traveled, educated and enjoyed themselves from the mid-nineteenth into the twenty-first centuries.

Many photos and documents offered to this project are from disparate individuals and families, but as a collection they tell larger stories. Recent GRHC publication and interview projects have already shifted emphasis from dominant cultural groups; but this web effort aims especially at locating materials from previously untapped sources, adding untold stories to the local record. To date, Barrett has organized two large collecting efforts involving City High School students and African Americans at the Grand Rapids Public Library's Taste-of-Soul Sunday. Now web surfers are beginning to contact the Commission themselves to offer materials. In the queue to be processed are an image of a buffalo soldier and newspaper stories on lecturer Wong Chin Foo. Foo famously sought U.S. citizenship in nineteenth-century Grand Rapids. The organization of

varied materials into broader photo essays by the GRHC both celebrates diverse cultural heritages and shows how specific ethnic groups have interacted to form one unique community: Grand Rapids, Michigan.

By participating in this unusual, hands-on preservation of local cultural data, community members can now see their materials displayed on the GRHC website and in turn become more aware of the vast resources already available at the Grand Rapids Public Library's History & Special Collections Center. In the future, teachers will be able to exchange lesson plans in the "Classroom" section of the website. Students can already see how the historical photos, letters and documents illustrated in their history textbooks are similar to items belonging to their families. Weaving family records into the community story on a history website demonstrates that those items are a valued part of local history and that city government affirms the importance of preserving them. Students especially will no doubt be impressed that their material can be accessed worldwide and throughout their continuing school years; indeed, their lives.

Please proceed to the website – www.historygrandrapids.org – and, by clicking on "Classroom" and "How to Use Primary Sources," note that Barrett has provided helpful advice on how to use the site. Then survey the material being collected and processed into photo essays. First, click on "Search," then "Browse by Subject." Scroll down to view the list of categories; choose any subject and witness the full documentation accorded each and every image. Then shift to "Explore Photo Essays"; click on "Service" to find announcement of an important collection of materials on Grand Rapids women during World War I just recently rediscovered. Now check out "What's New" and click on the "Air Pollution" essay featuring Smoke Hawk Towner. Did you think environmental concerns began in the 1960s? Explore the strong "Learn More" sections at the conclusions of photo essays. Finally, note how the site participates in broader community historical affairs by announcing upcoming events. Range at will.

You have just finished an appetizer course by sampling the offerings of a unique historical project. Diana Barrett has already arranged for the Grand Rapids Community Media Center, which designed the site's software and hosts its hardware, to share the frame with other interested historical groups. The Grand Rapids Historical Commission's virtual archive models future collecting possibilities and explores one direction for innovative recombinations of materials. Thanks to Diana Barrett.