Daughter of the American Revolution embodies volunteerism to a “tea”

NAME: Caroline Pharr Sobolak
AGE: 70
TOWN WHERE I LIVE NOW: Cary
HOMETOWN: Pittsburgh, Pa.
FAMILY (spouse/children): I have two grown children, Brian and Christine, and five grandchildren and I’ve been married for 48 years to my husband, Bill.
EDUCATION: Bachelor’s degree in home economics education, Penn State University; master’s degree in communications, Wheaton College; master’s degree in education - special education, Northern Illinois University.
FAVORITE MOVIE: Too many to name just one
LAST CD BOUGHT: Les Miserables
WINE OR BEER: Wine
STEAK OR SALAD: Salad
KETCHUP OR MUSTARD ON A HOT DOG: Mustard
FUNNY/INTERESTING THING PEOPLE TYPICALLY DON’T KNOW ABOUT YOU: People are always surprised to learn I used to smoke and I taught Home Economics. I love education and learning more than history.

I help the museum through volunteering.

SOBOLAK: I volunteer at the Admissions Desk on Wednesdays, and I’ve done work on grants. I recently helped secure a donation for conservation and historical preservation at the Pringle School.

TRACER: How long have you been here?
SOBOLAK: I’ve been a member for over 10 years and an active volunteer for over 1 year.

TRACER: Why do you volunteer?
SOBOLAK: I am interested in history and volunteering at MCHS dovetails nicely with my volunteer activity for the Kishwaukee Trail of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution.

TRACER: Why volunteer?
SOBOLAK: I feel it is important to support the museum and the community.

TRACER: What prompted you to choose this organization?
SOBOLAK: My husband. He’s steadfast. He’s kind and he’s stood by me during the last 48 years. He’s just a good man. He’s just my rock.

TRACER: What is the best part of working at the museum?
SOBOLAK: I love history and volunteering at MCHS dovetails nicely with my volunteer activity for the Kishwaukee Trail of the National Society Daughters of the American Revolution.

TRACER: What is your role with the McHenry County Historical Society?
SOBOLAK: I volunteer at the Admissions Desk on Wednesdays, and I’ve done work on grants. I recently helped secure a donation for conservation and historical preservation at the Pringle School.

TRACER: What is the best part of working at the museum?
SOBOLAK: It allows me to continue learning about history and the people who lived in McHenry County.

TRACER: What motivated you to become involved in this organization?
SOBOLAK: My love of history.

TRACER: Who is your mentor?
SOBOLAK: My husband.

TRACER: What are your long-term goals?
SOBOLAK: To continue volunteering and learning about history.

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WILA’s original programming, creativity and signal strength were key as it made history

By KURT BEGALKA

If you are like most folks, you probably never heard of Edwin H. Armstrong, but this New York engineer and inventor was responsible for the technology that brought McHenry County its first radio station.

Years after inventing the super heterodyne, which enabled headphones to be replaced by speakers, Armstrong solved radio’s biggest problem: static. In 1933 he successfully tested frequency modulation, or FM, which enabled stations with the same frequency to not interfere with other.

“Radios simply pick up whichever FM station is the strongest,” notes the Economic History Association of La Crosse, Wis. “This means that low-power FM stations can operate in close proximity.”

On June 17, 1936, FM radio was demonstrated to the Federal Communications Commission for the first time.

In September 1948, what is purported to be McHenry County’s first radio station began broadcasting. Station 92.1 FM, operated by the Northern Illinois Broadcasting Co., christened a 316-foot tower on Howard Benton’s farm with a bottle of champagne a month earlier. Investment partners were Benton, who served as the station’s general manager, influential attorney David Jostyn and George Huffman, owner of McHenry County Land Co. in Woodstock.

The Crystal Lake Herald reported that, “Telegrams and telephone calls are pouring in to congratulate WILA on its clarity. One man phoned from Chicago to say that it was the best FM station he has ever heard. ‘My radio hasn’t even got an antenna,’ he declared, ‘and yet your music and speaking comes in beautifully.’”

The studio for “The Voice of McHenry County,” was located at 122 ½ Benton St. in town. The entire cost of the station was $45,000.

According to a Benton family history, Howard originally wanted the call letters WILL as a homage to Woodstock, Ill., only to learn that the University of Illinois had beaten him to the punch. The FCC assigned the call letters WILA.

The station was on the air for 18 1/2 hours daily and for...
if an exterior door was opened when the building was unoccupied. It was loud and could be heard all over town. Since I was the only board member/officer who lived in Union, about 200 yards from the museum, I answered several calls from responding deputies. Only one such call was because of a “break in.” Two teenagers broke a window in the kitchen area to enter and got “spooked” once inside. They opened an overhead door to escape and the alarm sounded. Alarm sensors were on the front door and the gym overhead door and the false alarms stemmed from switch malfunctions or lightning. We should have been more concerned about fire than theft or vandalism. The village had a volunteer fire department, two pumper trucks, and an elevated ball-shaped water tower. More concerning is that the school building had no working fire alarm. Our MCHS board decided, shortly after acquiring the building, to convert what was the school office into a small apartment big enough for two people. This was done. The idea was to seek an adult couple that would take up residence in the apartment, rent-free just to have someone on the premises at night and weekends. In hindsight, that was a wise decision. I believe our first occupant was a young, single man who occupied the apartment for about a year. The next occupants were a couple. The man traveled some in his work, but the wife was there most of the time.

I don’t remember the exact year or month that the near catastrophic event I am relating occurred, but I believe it was in the early winter of 1974 or ’75. I believe the museum still had not opened to the public. I do well remember that sometime between 9 and 10 p.m. I got a phone call from the lady tenant. Since I was the only board member living in Union, I was used to getting calls at irregular hours to perform some duty for the museum or for an alarm incident. The lady said, “I’m here in the museum by myself and I can’t get the heating system to shut off. It is extremely hot here, even with the windows open.” I was familiar with the hot water heating system for the school building. A gas-fired boiler in the basement, under the 1928 addition, heated water in a closed system, which was pumped to various radiators in an in-house radiator system. A boiler in the basement, under the 1928 addition, heated water in a closed system, which was pumped to various radiators in the school building. I had been doing “handyman” work around the museum and was familiar with the basement layout.

I advised our tenant that I would come right over to see what could be done. In about four minutes I was at the building, where I noted a door and some windows were open. The lady met me at the door and I immediately noted that she had just cause for alarm. The building’s interior was extremely hot. I immediately opened the basement door and descended a short flight of stairs. The furnace greeted me with a roaring fire in the firebox. Part of the sheet metal on top of the firebox was a cherry red. The whole furnace was smoking due to burning paint. The heated water pipes were pinging and clangning as they were trying to expand from the heat. I immediately went to the main gas shutoff valve to the furnace and turned off the gas fuel. The fire went out and the system began to cool down. An examination of the furnace by a technician the next day confirmed that the furnace was a complete loss and the firebox twisted beyond repair or replacement. The hot water heating system for the building was never used again.

The museum survived the winter with the use of electric space heaters and essentially leaving a large part of the building unheated in cold weather. No big deal was made of what could have happened. But over the years I have relived that situation and speculated on what could have happened had no one been there when the thermostat switched and the high temperature safety shutoff switches on the furnace failed. In my opinion, when I shut off the gas supply valve to the furnace, the basement was within minutes of exploding into a flaming fire. The heat was intense. The 50-year-old dry wood floor joists, just a few inches above the furnace were about to burst into flame. The small amount of asbestos insulation above the furnace could not have prevented it.

Once on fire, the flames would have traveled quickly through the old wood floor and into the stairwell leading to the second floor and the attic. The bell tower, being directly connected to the attic by a short ladder would undoubtedly have made the bell tower a type of chimney for the whole building. In a very short time the building would have been engulfed in uncontrolled fire, even with the assistance of neighboring fire departments.

If a strong west wind was blowing, a not uncommon event, the flames from the school building would attack the nearby homes where the fire might have jumped from one house to the next.

So, what if the MCHS directors had not provided a person in the building when the furnace switches failed and the furnace continued to run wild until it flashed into flames? Credit the board’s wisdom and a little plain dumb luck for preventing the loss of that old school building on a cold winter’s night.