



# THE SPIRIT

Preserving the life of America's unique community

A publication of  
the  
Park Forest  
Historical  
Society

Vol. 21 No. 3

February 2026

## We Celebrated Our 41st Anniversary with "Revisiting Utopia" at Freedom Hall

### PFHS Board Officers 2025-2026

Chris Janota, President  
Jane Nicoll, Vice Pres.  
Rick Wasney, Treas.  
Judith McGee, Secretary  
Jane Nicoll, Archivist

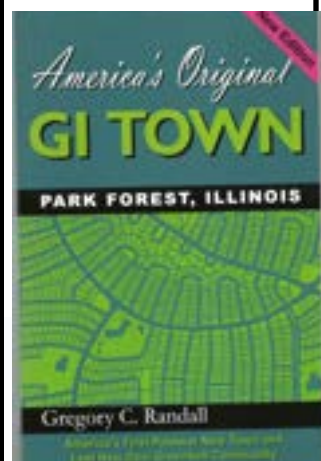
### Directors

Safiyyah Al Amin  
Raymond Myles  
Debbie Page  
Vernice Johnson -Warren

### Interested in helping preserve Park Forest History?

We are looking for  
volunteers for  
Museum, Archive,  
Mailings, and Moving.  
Contact Jane Nicoll,  
708-481-4252, or via  
email on the website,  
[parkforesthistor.org](http://parkforesthistor.org).

Connect on Facebook:  
-1950s Park Forest House  
Museum  
-Park Forest Historical  
Society



On January 30, 2026, the Society turned 41 years old. Jane Nicoll is the only remaining founder, though Neal Ney, former Library Director who encouraged the founding and library involvement is still living. On January 31st we celebrated with more than 200 current and former Park Foresters who attended an event we sponsored, a public viewing of the documentary film, "Revisiting Utopia".

The film was produced by Revisiting Utopia group, directed by former resident, Phil Rockrohr. The film consists of interviews and narrative on the experiences of people who grew up in Park Forest from 1959-1990. The team found and interviewed Park Forest's first black family and head of that family Charles Z. "C.Z." Wilson, who came on December 24, 1959 to break the color barrier. Mr. Wislon passed soon after. It tells the story of how Harry Teshima, a former resident of a WWII Japanes internment camp set out to integrate Park Forest and to fight racism, and told how others in the Village helped.

Author of America's Original GI Town, Gregory Randall, does a video segment. Don DeMarco former assistant manager of Park Forest in charge of overseeing integration efforts, speaks.

There are interviews with black and white adults who grew up going to Park Forest schools and how they perceived integration and the desegregation of schools here. Originally thinking he was documenting a Utopian situation, Phil soon realized that not all of the black students were treated as well as hoped. His group had not realized how much the peaceful integration had been "engineered" by something which in the 70's became labeled, "Integration Maintenance."

Overall, in spite of initial disillusionment, those interviewed were proud of how the integration in Park Forest was managed, producing an outcome that even those who had bad experiences felt produced a fairly positive place to grow up.

The film was enthusiastically received by the audience.

Both Jane Nicoll and President Chris Janota made appeals to the audience to join the Society in "Saving Your History", to become involved in programs the Society holds, becoming members and supporting our efforts to disseminate Park Forest history. Chris pointed out that THEIR stories were as much history as those of the pioneer families and that we want them to share their stories with us.

The Society Board is proud to have supported the making of this film. Jane Nicoll was very involved in supplying materials, photographs and information to the team throughout production.

We consider use of our collection to be validation of the efforts and funds it has taken to save it and to make it available.

### Thank You for Your Generosity

The Park Forest Historical Society extends heartfelt thanks to all of our members and annual fund donors for the generosity you have shown to the Society in this challenging year.

You really are the best!

**In My Own Little Corner**  
**By Jane Nicoll**

I am beginning to make moves toward packing. Since another church has expressed interest in the building, we know our days are numbered in St. Mary's. We have moved the museum, alone, three times with more minor moves of things in and out of storage over the 27 years the museum has existed.

The Local History and Archive Collection was moved and morphed within the Library while it was there from 1981 to 2026, then moved in parts to and from storage, into museum nooks and crannies, then in whole to St. Mary's in January 2012. The Local History Collection and the public copies of the oral histories came to the museum from the library in about 2017.

We know how to pack it and move the collections. There is just much more in both collections than in earlier moves.

**"Park Forest Historical Society" YouTube Channel. Watch it. Subscribe to it!**

Join us from the comfort of home to watch on our YouTube channel the video presented November 9, 2024, "A Celebration of America's Original G.I. Town. Park Forest history video.

While you are on our channel be sure to check out all the other videos we have posted, especially our panel and group discussions on Integration in Park Forest, our recent Hall of Fame Inductions and panel discussions on the history of the Aquacenter.

Presentations remain on our YouTube channel, Park Forest Historical Society indefinitely, so you can watch them anytime. Share our channel with your friends and subscribe to it to improve our ratings.

**We Have a New Home for Our Archive, Office and for our Museum**

As we told you last year in February, we had just heard that the Joliet Diocese was closing our home, St. Mary's Catholic Church. By March, 2025, under the leadership of outgoing Village Manager, Tom Mick, the Society was offered the former Nurse's Plus space in the lower level of Village Hall. Negotiation of an agreement has been slowly ongoing. We are now at a stage of simply ironing out the "legalese" of the agreement before signing. Current Village Manager, Jon Kindseth, who came on June 16, 2025, is now on board with our being in the space, and we hope to sign as soon as the Village approves legal language suggested by our attorney for the protection of both entities.

As a considerable blessing to us, Joliet Diocese, three weeks before we were to vacate, knowing we had a pending agreement, offered us an extension to our lease for the St. Mary's spaces. We literally had nowhere to go except for storage. Been there, done that. St. Mary's since our very first encounter with them and throughout our occupancy has been responsive to our needs and generous in their cooperation with us. We now deal with Father Thomas Milotta, pastor of St. Liborius and St. Boniface, who has been understanding of our predicament.

We were delighted to have been able to put up our Christmas/Hanukkah display once more, and had hoped to put out the Valentine display which we love so much in St. Mary's. Just as we had discussed it while packing up Christmas, we discovered that the current snow on the roof was once again leaking in on the collection via ice melting over the gutters onto the flat roof under the peaked roof. The leak wasn't big, yet, but we can't risk the collection and the museum is currently entirely covered in plastic sheeting. So no Valentine's Day this year. Yours truly is very sad about this.

It will take time for us to alter the space in Village Hall to accommodate our collections. The Society will pay for the renovations. Rent for the space is very reasonable.

### Hall of Fame 2026

**The 31st Annual Hall of Fame Induction will be held Sunday, March 29, 2026 at 3 p.m. in the Nathan Manilow Theater of Freedom Hall, 410 Lakewood Boulevard in Park Forest. The Induction ceremony will be followed by a reception in the lobby.**

Please make a point this year to attend the live ceremony to express your gratitude to the inductees for their contributions to make Park Forest a special place to live. We aren't ready to announce their names, yet, but you will want to be there, as several very fine people will be inducted.

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### **SAVE THE DATE Sunday, May 17, 2026, 2:30 p.m.**

We are planning to hold our Ice Cream Social at Village Hall and may or may not be able to show you how we are progressing with our move.

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Photos of most Revisiting Utopia team members present January 31, 2026 at the Freedom Hall showing.

And a photo of the almost full house crowd who came to see the documentary. Freedom Hall was sold out, but some donors did not brave the bitter cold to come in person.

The team had done other showings before ours, including a paid access online showing. They are weighing their options for when and how to do future showings.

They do plan to enter the documentary in film festivals. From l. to r., John V. Moore; Joe Zake; Phil Rockrohr, director; composer, Tony Lewis; historian Brendan Goff; and Jean Hodges, journalistic director (in the shadows). Thanks to all who contributed to Phil's fundraiser for PFHS so we could sponsor this showing at Freedom Hall.



Join us Sunday, February 22, 2026, 2:30 p.m. in Park Forest Village Board Meeting Room, 350 Victory Drive, for a presentation by Dr. Larry A. McClellan, author and scholar on the Underground Railroad. This program is free and open to the general public.



Dr. Larry McClellan is presenting his ongoing studies of the Underground Railroad and freedom seekers who passed through Northern Illinois and Indiana en route to Canada.

Dr. McClellan began his early studies in Illinois and then extended his research to Northwest Indiana. Recently, he has extended his research to the South Bend region.

A nationally recognized scholar on the subject, from right in our own backyard, he has written several books, *The Underground Railroad South of Chicago*, 2019; *To the River*, 2019; and *Onward to Chicago: Freedom Seekers and the Underground Railroad in Northeastern Illinois*, 2023; and numerous other publications. Copies of his book will be available for sale at our program.

His research resulted in Crete being named to the National Park Service Network to Freedom register of the Underground Railroad. The McCoy Farmstead site along Sauk Trail, just east of Western Avenue is also a verified site, which we hope will be included at a later date, as the MCCoy's worked with the Congregational Church in Crete. For the time being the national support of the Network to Freedom is suspended. Governor Pritzker and the State of Illinois have initiated support of the program until reason returns.

In 1970, McClellan completed his doctoral studies at the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. He previously studied at Occidental College in Los Angeles and the University of Ghana in West Africa.

Also in 1970, McClellan helped to start Governors State University, south of Chicago, where he taught for 30 years. He is emeritus Professor of Sociology and Community Studies.