"From the Cradle to the Grave" Exhibition opens September 14
Author Newell Chester, to speak September 21
Laurel and Hardy open Saturday Movies at the Museum

Feature: In Search of Fischerville
In the spring of 1993 I set out to photograph the former Fischer Store on Dodd Road. For over thirty years Fischer's was Mendota Township's community hub. I planned to use the photo in preparing a Heritage Map of Mendota Heights.

Stopping at the building I realized it had changed too much since the days of Fischerville. It looked abandoned until two men appeared in a doorway. I told them of my quest for a photo of the original store and they directed me to a side door. Inside I met Harry Kirchner. Harry knew the store very well, in fact he bought it from Frank Fischer. He didn't have a photo but said, "Amme would have one." I said, "Who is Amme?" A little surprised, he said, "Amme is Frank's widow and she lives at the next corner on Creek Avenue." Amme and Frank Fischer had owned and operated Fischerville.

Within five minutes I met Amme Fischer and explained my objective. She was great. As she sorted through a box of photos and papers I found a photo and was introduced to the days of Fischerville. I also learned her name was really Alma, Amme was Frank's idea and it stuck.

On February 15, 1995 I met Amme again to revisit the Fischerville story with her and her daughters, Caroline and Nancy.

It all started with Frank's mother, Theresa Fischer. Frank Fischer was born in 1901 and lived on the family dairy farm on Wentworth Avenue with older brothers Louis and Rudy. Frank's father died in 1913 and a few years later Theresa decided to move to a 65 acre farm she purchased from W. F. Franzmeier. The farm was located on Dodd Road a half mile south of the old Mendota Road. Frank's oldest brother, Louie (Louis) married Laura Franzmeier and they farmed at the intersection of the Dodd and Mendota Roads. Later Louie started a golf course on his property which became the Riverview Country Club, today's Mendakota Country Club. Rudy became a Dakota County Deputy Sheriff.

A Small Country Store On Dodd Road

In 1924 Theresa and Frank decided to start a store. According to Amme and her daughters, grandmother Theresa liked people and was very active in the community. Her new store's location was at the crossroads of a township that lacked the convenience of a local store. Dodd Road (Highway 49) was a major route for local farmers going to market in St. Paul and St. Paul's gateway to the south. Prospects for their venture looked promising.

The store was a small, trim, white frame building with a small name plate at the entrance "Fischer's Farm." A shed behind the store displayed in large letters "Dakota County Market" and "Live Poultry for sale." On hot summer days an outside table under a window awning beckoned travellers to stop for refreshments. Undoubtedly Frank lettered the sign. Sign making became Frank's art form during the next 30 years.

Now A Country Emporium On Dodd Road

Business on Dodd road must have been good. It didn't take long for Frank to think about expanding. In 1927, Frank realized his dream of a general merchandise store in a much larger building. The new building was constructed of concrete block with a brick front. Two large display window units and a garage door faced on Dodd.
Road. A full basement held additional merchandise and opened at ground level to the rear. Little did Frank know that twenty years later the basement would house the township's first fire truck.

In the rear of the building the Fischers built a four room apartment. Frank and his mother moved into the apartment and rented out the farm. The apartment made it convenient to serve customers and provided a greater measure of security.

"Fischerville"

It would not be until the mid 1940s that Frank posted his first "Fischerville" signs on Dodd Road. At the time he didn't say why he did it. Much later, in the late 1950s, he gave the reason. The reason harks back to a sad event occurring some twenty-five years earlier.

In 1932 Frank's brother Rudy was killed in the line of duty as a Dakota County Deputy Sheriff. Rudy and another deputy apprehended two men robbing the clubhouse of Louie Fischer's golf course. While booking the robbers at the Hastings jail one of the robbers pulled the officer's gun and killed Rudy. The robbers escaped. A citizen search party was formed and Louie became a member. It was Louie who flushed one of them from a cornfield and turned him over to authorities. The other robber was captured later in the day. Both were sentenced to Stillwater Prison.

Later Frank posted the "Fischerville" signs in memory of Rudy. Theresa Fischer passed away in 1932, just two months after Rudy's untimely death.

Enter Amme

I asked Amme how she met Frank. "It was at a dance at Shields-by-the-Lake on Lone Oak Road near Pilot Knob Road," she responded. "Those were the days of barn dances."

Amme grew up in Inver Grove Township about seven miles southeast of Fischerville. Her parents were Caroline and George Kromschroeder. George arrived in Inver Grove Township in 1881 and worked on the Kleinschmidt farm on the Old German Road (Babcock Trail). Later he and Caroline farmed approximately 140 acres. George Kromschroeder also served as road overseer for the Township. Today a portion of Amme's father's farm hosts the Inver Grove Heights Community College.

Amme was the youngest daughter of fifteen children, eleven of whom survived to adulthood. She recalled how her older sisters, who worked in St. Paul but lived on the farm, taught their young sisters the latest dance steps. The family Victrola provided the dance music.

A Hudson wedding and an unusual visit

Alma (Amme) Kromschroeder and Frank Fischer were married on November 2, 1935, in Hudson, Wisconsin; Johnny Pernich and Helen Plan were the witnesses.
Amme smiled when she reflected on where she and Frank went after the wedding ceremony. I anticipated she might say Lake Superior’s North Shore, which I knew Frank liked, or possibly right back to the store. Neither was the case. The newlyweds motored from Hudson up-river to Stillwater. Amme explained that being so close to the state prison made Frank think of the men who shot Rudy. He just wanted to be sure they were still in prison. They were still there.

**Forming a family at "Fischerville"**

Moving from a farm to a country store must have been quite a change for Amme. However, this was still farm country and Amme knew many of the store’s regulars. The newlyweds moved into the store’s four room apartment.

During the next five years Frank and Amme would have two daughters, Caroline and Nancy. Caroline was born in 1936 and Nancy in 1940. Both attended the District 191, a one room schoolhouse a short walk south on Dodd Road. Later Caroline attended South St. Paul High School and Nancy, Henry Sibley in West St. Paul. In their younger years they must have been the envy of schoolmates who didn’t have a candy counter or ice cream freezer in their homes. While the schools provided a formal education both daughters experienced a very practical education in human relationships, business, and civics as they grew up at Fischerville.

**Introducing the Fischer Store**

To get some insight into operating and living in a store one should have an idea of what the store offered in merchandise. As I sat with Amme and her daughters, Caroline started describing the various store sections. To the left of the entrance was soap and oil followed by shoes, clothes, school supplies, and household goods. In the middle were dry goods, fabric, pots and pans. At this point Nancy injected, "Don’t forget the cookies. I remember them because they were in open bins." Nancy smiled as she emphasized the accessibility of the cookies.

Caroline continued by listing groceries, barrels of vinegar, packaged meat, fresh sausage, bacon, corned beef, and on into ammunition, hardware, brooms and fan belts. You could tell she must have helped fill the shelves during her school days. Amme said, "Don’t forget the basement." The basement held, nuts, bolts, nails, wire, rope, saddles, and even yokes for oxen. Amme said she had often asked Frank how long the yokes had been there. Later Frank donated the yokes to the Dakota County Historical Society for its Old Town exhibition.

I thought they had covered most of the merchandise when someone recalled the soft drinks and candy. Soon the list started again with horse collars, rug beaters, shovels, and laundry tubs. At that point I said "I’ve got the picture. Everything." Then Amme said, "What about the out-buildings." Stored in these sheds were salt licks for cattle, cement, bushel baskets, berry boxes, and 100 lb. sacks of feed. Our list ended when we looked at a photograph and saw the gasoline pumps in front of the store. And, gas.

**Living the life of Fischerville**

The store opened seven days a week from 8 AM to 6 PM. In later years Frank and Amme closed on Sunday afternoons. The kitchen opened directly to the store and the door was open during meal times so someone could step out to help customers. Frank had insisted on eating lunch at 12 noon and dinner at 5 PM. The family learned to eat fast. When Caroline married and left the store Frank agreed to a later dinner to ease the store coverage during the rush hour.

While general stores are natural meeting places, Fischer’s store surpassed the meaning. Frank just naturally liked people. The checker board on the tiny round table and wire backed chairs indicates the relaxed pace of doing business. I wonder how many husbands were sent to the store for an item to complete a recipe or dinner menu and arrived home with the wrong item or a forgetful frown. Frank was always ready for a game and he usually won.

Maybe it was the store’s relaxed atmosphere that prompted Frank to start putting up signs with his words of wisdom. If he didn’t like something he told his customers about it in hand lettering. With a sign on the wall he could just point. An example was:

"Please do not play with merchandise.
We do the inspecting.
Buying and playing are two different things."

Once a reporter asked Frank how he came to have such a large variety of merchandise. He replied, "Mebbe I built up the inventory a little strong. But I kinda liked to have salesmen stop around...couple of them played checkers some."

**Hard to find items and a card game**

Fisherville must have acquired a reputation for hard to find merchandise, especially out-of-date
items. A customer entered the store one day asking Amme if they, by chance, had a small hand coal shovel. "The kind you use for a pot bellied stove," he said. To the customer's surprise, Amme said, "Sure we have them," and promptly got one. It was if the customer had won a prize. He thanked her and said he had been at several stores before one suggested Fischer's.

Frank also liked to play cards. Saturday night was a routine card night. However, that didn't prevent games during the week and, later, on Sunday afternoons. Games were played on the kitchen table. Amme recounted how Walter Dehrer, a friend who lived on the Mendota Road, would arrive for Sunday card games and immediately purchase a pint of ice cream. He consumed the ice cream during the game. Amme provided the spoon. Walter also played some weekday afternoons when he picked up his daughter at the District 191 school. On these days he had one eye on the cards and ice cream and the other on the clock to be sure he arrived at school on time.

When asked if they challenged their father at checkers a daughter said, "No. Dad was the checker player; but we all played cards."

The mid 1930s were difficult years for many in the area. Frank went out of his way to help many a farmer. Amme remembered a poor family who had moved into an old farm house down the road. The husband came into the store one day and asked if he could obtain some groceries and supplies on account. Frank believed he would be honest to his word and filled the order. Frank was right. In another case Frank actually loaned money to a customer who needed a down payment for a house. Frank was right again.

Most sales to locals during the years were on account. Caroline remembers it was the norm to write up a bill and stick it on the counter spindel. "We didn't even ask them to sign it," she said. With few exceptions payments came with the next paycheck or return from the farmer's market. Nancy recalled how her mother and father took in eggs in trade for groceries. The egg crates were used to repack groceries and supplies customers took home. Taking in eggs meant candling eggs and all members of the family participated. When local newsmen Lou Gellerman interviewed Frank in 1950 he commented in his article that the interview took place while Frank was grading 36 dozen eggs.

The "Whole Show"

When Frank was away at the bank, purchasing merchandise, and later on fire runs, Amme was the "whole show" as Caroline reflected. "She waited on customers handling 100 lbs. of chicken feed to pumping fifty cents worth of gasoline. She stocked shelves, cleaned, and waxed floors as well as being homemaker and mother. She sewed clothes for us and herself and gardened. We had a huge lawn next to the store with many flower beds. She also handled the monthly billing statements."

I asked if the family ever had the opportunity to take a vacation. "We took them, however they were brief," agreed Caroline and Nancy. "In the early 1940s we took a trip to the Ozarks. Our departure started when the store closed on Saturday and we returned the next Wednesday. We drove long hours at night. Later in the 1940s we visited Dallas and Fort Worth repeating the Saturday night departure and night driving. As they grew older Caroline and Nancy operated the store permitting Mom and Dad to take a few days off.

An extended family

Listening to Caroline and Nancy one could conclude the Fischer family included store regulars, checker and card players, supplier salesmen, some characters, and even some who waited for the bus.

Bus? Yes, Fischer's Store was also an official stopping point for the Jefferson Lines route from St. Paul to Northfield and south. The bus schedule was posted and passengers would wait in the store. A light in front of the store was turned on to signal bus drivers to stop. Later the daughters turned on the light for themselves when they boarded the bus each morning going to work in St. Paul. One of the store's customers recalled that in the early days the
bus had a door on the side for each seat much like European rail cars. At each stop the bus driver got out and opened the door for boarding or departing passengers.

With the store open eleven hours a day it seemed friends and customers were always around. Besides the kitchen being used for card games one of the bedrooms was often used by customers who wanted to try on a pair of overalls or other clothing.

Caroline remembered a salesman who regularly stopped called Smokey Bill. Smokey traded guns and ammunition. One day as Smokey was leaving the store one of his guns went off putting a hole through the floor. The hole went unplugged as a reminder of what could happen. Years later, and after Frank sold the store to Harry Kirchner, Caroline stopped in the store. She looked down and the hole was still there.

Frank struck up a friendship which might seem unusual, but then, life in Fischerville was always unconventional. In the early 1950s a man stopped in the store and saw the checkerboard. Amme recalled the man told Frank he liked playing checkers. They played and Frank kept winning and needled the visitor a little. Finally the guest started winning and Frank acknowledged he could play some. Frank’s opponent was Lonnie Hauser who had just moved into a home down the Dodd Road. Lonnie was a well known sculptor with many commissions and shows to his credit. His wife, Nancy, was famous in her own right, as creator of the Nancy Hauser Dance Troupe. The Fischer and Hauser families became good friends and Lonnie and Frank remained adversaries at the checkerboard.

Many years after that first checker game Lonnie’s sons, Michael and Tony, and daughter, Heidi, returned to join in Amme’s 80th birthday party. Michael and Tony are professional Flamenco guitarists and Heidi has carried on the Nancy Hauser Dance Troupe.

A very significant year in Fischer services

In 1947 the City of St. Paul advised it would no longer be able to provide fire fighting services to Mendota Township. By this time suburban sprawl was entering the township and the township lacked hydrants and an adequate water supply. The town board called a meeting and Frank and Louie Fischer were on hand. The result was formation of the Mendota Township Volunteer Fire Department. Frank Fischer was elected chief. Frank led the department as its chief until his passing in 1961. Through these years Frank devoted a good portion of his time and energy to developing the department’s proficiency. He was also active in state and regional firefighter associations and served as president of the regional group.

On the map

It was in the early 1950s that Fischerville started appearing on local maps. Frank’s “Fischerville” signs were in place but they didn’t give the population. In fact the population decreased to three when daughter Caroline married in 1955.

The Fischerville Fire Station

"Fischerville” became home base for the volunteer fire department. In fact a portion of the basement became the garage for the first fire truck. Next to the telephone in Amme’s kitchen was the volunteer alert list. A button in the kitchen also controlled the village fire siren. Caroline described what it was like to be the home of a fire department when a fire call came in. "The call came in and Mom, Dad, or one of us turned on the siren. Dad took off for the fire. Mom began calling the firemen. Nancy and I ran to the firehall, unlocked the door, opened the garage doors, posted the location of the fire on the blackboard, and waited outside the firehall to give firemen the location of the fire."
Fortunately fires or emergencies didn't happen every day. However, every day at 12 noon one of the family pushed the button to test the siren.

When Caroline described the family's fire routine I couldn't help but picture the reaction of a customer trying on a pair of overalls when the action started.

The fire department also formed an auxiliary. Amme became a charter member and is still active. The auxiliary members were usually wives of firefighters and those called first had spouses who were quickly available. The calling system was liked a pyramid club in reverse. Frank and Amme were proud how quickly the firefighters responded.

The volunteers became very proficient and at one time provided coverage for Mendota, Inver Grove, and Eagan townships and the City of Mendota. Coverage is still supplied to the cities of Mendota Heights, Sunfish Lake, Mendota, and Lilydale. As the department and equipment grew a new fire hall was constructed adjacent to the Fischer store.

I asked Amme if she ever went to a fire or emergency. She responded, "Only once. It was a terrible accident and Frank was ill. The captain on the scene called and asked me to bring the department's station wagon to transport a victim to the hospital. They had been unable to get an ambulance. I can't recall if I closed the store but I know it was the fastest I have ever driven. It didn't take long to get to the scene but I was all nerves. When asked if I wanted to drive the victim to the hospital I deferred to one of the firemen."

A home of their own

In the mid 1950s the Friendly Hills subdivision was underway and the former Fischer farm was sold to a California developer. In 1957, as project was nearing completion, a member of the construction firm approached Frank and asked if he would like to buy his home. The house was on Creek on the next corner north of the store. He explained his job on the project at an end and he desired to return to California. Maybe the offer helped Frank decide to make life a little easier. Afterall the house was just a half-block from the store and less to the firehall. Shortly after Frank, Amme, and Nancy moved to their new home.

Frank, Amme, and Nancy continued to operate the store. The apartment at the back of the store became stockrooms for merchandise. And as expected the store became a meeting place for the new Friendly Hills home owners. The township was now incorporated as the Village of Mendota Heights and the new village held its meetings in the firehall.

Ready to roll. Frank Fischer led the volunteer fire department from its creation in 1947 until his passing in 1961. The first fire truck, pictured here, was originally housed in the basement of the Fischer Store.

When the Minnesota Centennial photo book appeared in 1958, page 170 was devoted to a photo of the store from the inside out. Frank is at the checker board with one of his cronies. They are surrounded by bottles of soft drinks, batteries, crescent wrenches, thermos bottles, a ceiling full of "V"-belts, netting and more. He was proud of "Fischerville's" recognition but he took a lot of ribbing.

Close of a chapter

In November 1960, three years after moving to their new home, Frank was diagnosed with cancer and hospitalized. It just happened that Garth Hiebert of the St. Paul Pioneer Press visited Fischer's store the day Frank returned from the hospital. Frank had been given six months to live. Amme told Garth there would be an ad in the paper the next day to sell the store.

In the next issue of the Pioneer Press, Garth Hiebert's Oliver Towne column was titled "Farewell Fischerville." One paragraph tells the story, "Frank Fischer, the mayor, the legend of Fischerville and Fischer's general store on Hwy 49 is selling that almost museum-like place out of the past. It's his health that called the end of as descriptive a chapter of suburban life as a novelist could find."

Frank appreciated Garth’s article and the many nice things it said. But, in typical Frank style, he said to Amme, "Why did he have to say museum-like. I'm trying to sell the place."

Frank Fischer died on February 17, 1961. The store was sold less than two weeks before his passing. Frank died three days before his 60th birthday. Not a long life, but a full life. That was Frank's way.