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Magazine

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Essay

Magic tricks and political tricks

By Paul Rozycki

When I was a kid I had an uncle who was a professional magician. He billed himself as the “World’s Second Greatest Magician” (He won second place in a magician’s competition of some sort.) As kids we were amazed by his magic tricks at family gatherings. He would pull coins out of our ears, then make them disappear, find the card we were thinking of in a deck, discover endless streams of rainbow-colored scarves hidden in our pockets and, of course, pull rabbits and doves out of hats. Every now and then, when we got to see his stage show, he would saw a lady in half, only to have her reappear, all in one piece, a few minutes later.

We knew they were magic tricks. But it was all great fun and we always looked forward to his visits.

However, today we are seeing a growing tradition of political stunts and tricks that are a lot less fun and probably less honest than the magic I recall as a kid.

Consider some actions to come out of Lansing recently.

For example, according to the Michigan Constitution, if the lawmakers pass a law that Michigan citizens object to, the voters have the right to place it on the ballot via a referendum.

With the appropriate number of signatures voters can overturn and block any law passed by the legislature – with one exception. Laws appropriating money can’t be subject to a referendum. And, for the most part, that makes sense. You don’t want voters changing or paralyzing the whole budget while the state is trying to operate on a daily basis.

But that sensible exception has now become a trick (magic or not) to prevent the voters from overturning controversial legislation.

Perhaps the most contentious pieces of legislation in recent years were the “Right to Work” laws passed in 2012. If any issue was likely to be challenged via a referendum this was it. But that law appropriated \$1 million for “administration” of the new policy blocking a public vote.

When a law allowing wolf hunting was passed last year, it was also a divisive issue and voters tried to block it by voting against wolf hunting in a referendum. No such luck. The new bill included an appropriation of about \$1 million for combating invasive species, such as the Asian carp. (Other factors have blocked the wolf hunt for now.)

When the voters overturned one emergency manager law in 2012 (P.A. 4), the legislature came back with a similar,

newer law (P.A. 436) that included ... guess what? An appropriation of money for emergency manager salaries that blocked future referendums on the law.

Similarly, the prevailing wage law, which would require union level wages for most state projects, now working its way through the legislature, also includes a \$75,000 appropriation for ‘disseminating information’ on the law.

The point isn’t that “right to work,” wolf hunting, emergency manager or prevailing wage laws are good or bad ideas. There are plausible arguments on both sides of all of those issues.

But if you believe in your views, go ahead and defend them. Be honest about it. Why pull a trick card out of your sleeve, and tack on a minor appropriation of money, just to make sure the voters can’t voice their opinions?

The use of the appropriations exception to block a public referendum on bills is probably the most obvious example of political tricks, but hardly the only one.

In the past few years there has been some discussion about changing the way we allocate our electoral votes in the state, from a winner-take-all system to one where electoral votes are earned in each of Michigan’s 14 congressional districts. There are reasonable, intelligent arguments in favor of and against all kinds of ways to ‘fix’ the Electoral College, but this attempt is simply one more trick to give the party that lost the popular vote the most electoral votes.

Even the use of the ‘lame duck’ legislative session might qualify as a political trick or stunt. In the past, a lame duck session, when it happened at all, was usually meant to take care of some last minute emergency issues that couldn’t wait until the new legislature was sworn in.

However, recently the post-election sessions have become a time when hundreds of bills are passed, with minimal committee hearings, and little publicity, by lawmakers who won’t be back to face the consequences of their actions.

Above and beyond the virtues (or lack thereof) of right to work, prevailing wage, wolf hunting, emergency managers, or electoral college change, a political process that relies on tricks and stunts to achieve its goals undermines trust in the whole system. Perhaps it’s not surprising that we see fewer and fewer people voting every year and we grow more cynical of government and those who are part of it.

All in all, when it comes to magic tricks, I’d rather see my uncle saw a lady in half.

(Continued on Page 7.)



Photograph by Edwin D. Custer

After shootings, CCNA hears updates, options

By Ashley O'Brien

Nearly 100 people heard Police Chief James Tolbert speak about recent neighborhood crime at the College Cultural Neighborhood Association May 21. The group also discussed other neighborhood issues and held elections.

Mike Herriman, College Cultural Neighborhood Watch chair, summarized shooting incidents several weeks earlier that had many neighbors concerned. The incidents involved individuals from two neighborhood homes and led to one woman being shot in the leg and retaliation shootings. Police raided both homes, two arrests were made and two more people are wanted for questioning.

Unbeknownst beforehand to meeting facilitators, two residents involved in the disputes attended and came forward from the audience to speak on their own behalf. Melinda Kelly, whose daughter was shot, addressed the group.

"I'm not a bad person but I'm gonna tell you like my momma told me, never judge a book by its cover. Open it up and read it. All of you are my neighbors. Instead of judging me, if there is something you want to know, knock on my door ... Ask me what's going on," Kelly said.

Kevin Palmer refuted her claims that individuals from his household caused the issues and said he will be going around the neighborhood collecting signatures to

get her family evicted. President Mike Keeler redirected the meeting back to the guest speakers.

Tolbert and Director of Planning and Development Megan Hunter answered questions and advised residents to be proactive in their neighborhood.

Tolbert explained residents could report suspicious activities, such as several vehicles frequenting a residence per day. He asked residents to document times, dates, and vehicle descriptions.

Herriman said anonymous information could be sent to P.O. Box 375 Flint MI 48503, addressed to CCNA. Tolbert recommended to instead call Crimestoppers at 1-800-SPEAK-UP. Police could act on tips from Crimestoppers immediately while it would take several days before tips sent through the mail would reach police.

Challenges the police department currently face include 25 fewer police officers than this time last year, Tolbert said. He added the department was constrained when pursuing criminal cases because victims are frequently unwilling to press charges.

Loitering or trespassing in parking lots is similar. According to Tolbert, business owners have to be willing to pursue the matter in court. He said some business owners worry about retaliation. The

department is currently pursuing a change in city ordinance that will give the police department jurisdiction to pursue those cases as the complainant. Tolbert added that business owners seemed very receptive to the proposal, which is moving ahead quickly.

If crime is reduced through proactive measures, Tolbert said that police will be more effective in addressing unpreventable emergencies.

Volunteers participating in radio patrol is one proactive measure the neighborhood could take. Tolbert said volunteers will need a background check and training so they know how to observe and report details.

Tolbert added neighborhoods who utilize the radio patrol will experience immediate results because their presence deters crime.

According to Hunter, residents can also be proactive with eliminating code violations in their neighborhood. Violations can include tall grass, parking on the lawn and trash in the yard.

"I would highly recommend you reach out to them, introduce yourself," she said. This simple action could make a big difference, especially with renters, who may not think about keeping up the property in the same way homeowners might.

Hunter's department has the authority to

(Continued on Page 7.)

International students from 40 countries becoming downtown's newest neighbors

By Andrew Keast

A decade ago, nearly every member of the student body at UM-Flint was either a citizen or permanent resident of the U.S. But after a concentrated institutional effort, that has changed in a big way. Once an almost invisible minority, the number of international students reached 772 the last semester (Winter 2015) or about 10 percent of enrollment.

That number includes 309 graduate students and 386 undergraduates from abroad, along with 77 taking courses in the university's English Language Program. They come from more than 40 countries, the most common points of origin being Saudi Arabia (home to 323), India (239), China (67), Nigeria (25) and South Korea (21).

The growing international influx affects both the incoming students themselves and the city, especially downtown where many live and shop. Merchants at the Flint Farmers' Market and other downtown businesses say they are getting to know and recognize many of the students personally.

University administrators assert the institution has come to regard global dimensions as crucial to effective education. Experience of disparate ethnic and national cultures "is no longer a luxury," according to Dr. Vahid Lofti, Senior Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Programs. "It is a must."

The university takes what Dr. Lofti calls "a holistic approach" to the cultivation of diversity on campus, as recruiters remain active throughout the year and around the world, while the school itself continues to attempt to build systems of support for its growing international community.

One crucial area of support is helping students achieve academic success in English, a language that still presents a considerable obstacle for some. Evidence from numerous interviews and the students' own responses suggests that some struggle just to get by, in English and in covering their basic life needs.

The results of a survey conducted last fall by "i-graduate," an international consulting agency hired by UM-Flint, were primarily positive, showing high rates of general satisfaction among the international community. Yet there were also complaints from these respondents – the 32 percent of the university's international population who participated in the survey.

One common source of frustration was transportation. "I did not expect [public] transportation within the state of Michigan to be so underdeveloped," said Claudia Quezada Garrido, a Chilean graduate stu-

dent in the university's English department, who is now well aware of how necessary cars have become to living in the U.S. About 200 of the international students reside outside of Flint, primarily in Grand Blanc and Davison, but the majority live nearby, often without cars, in rented houses, rooms and apartments and dormitories.

Yet Garrido, 32, spoke well of her experience. "You find other options," she said. "We make a group, and we take a bus." She appreciates the efforts of the university, which has arranged for the Mass Transportation Authority (MTA) to operate a free shuttle around campus from 9:30 a.m. to 10:30 p.m., Monday through Thursday. It also provides free transport to commercial centers such as Great Lakes Crossing and local supermarkets on weekends.

Jyosthna Ganesh, a 23-year-old Indian student working toward a bachelor's degree in biology, said that students "make the most of what is available to them." They attend events at the Flint Institute of Arts, Whiting Auditorium and the UM-Flint Theater, and many take advantage of the access to shopping and movies. According to Ganesh, most international students are familiar with downtown and enjoy walking together to the Farmers' Market and restaurants on Saginaw Street.

Experience of disparate ethnic and national cultures "is no longer a luxury. It is a must."

Dr. Vahid Lofti, UM-Flint.

While local conditions may be quite different from those of Yujin Kang's hometown in South Korea, Kang, 22, handles the situation well, working towards a master's degree in English while living in the dormitory on campus. Like much of the international community, she and her roommate enjoy the meals and various dishes served at the Farmers' Market, where they often go for essentials like milk, bread, produce and other necessities.

Vendors at the market confirm international students comprise a significant number of their customers. According to Tim Bishop, proprietor of B-Dogs, "They love coming over here for the variety."

Dawn Bowman, of Thompson Creek Turkey Farm, sees a lot of international students. Now acquainted with several by name, Bowman notices that while they don't buy a lot of uncooked meat, there is a real demand for her sandwiches. "They like the burgers and the turkey," she says, adding

that the Beirut Restaurant and Grocery also enjoys international popularity, and that many of those who dine at Sweet Peaces Vegan Café are international students.

Travis Crankshaw, of the market's M.T. Belly's Produce, wonders if Flint can satisfy students coming from around the world, but he is pleased to see that so many seem to be getting so much from the experience. "I see a ton of them – between 20 and 40 or so, just among our customers, on a Tuesday or Thursday, and at least 60 on a Saturday. And we have plenty of regulars."

Oaklin Mixon has observed the growing diversity from behind the counter at The Flint Crepe Company, which began operations on Saginaw Street in 2011. While some are concerned, he says, about "whether Flint is able to make them comfortable, even as it gives them new experiences." The students from abroad seem to comprise "half of our customers," according to Jessica Bowman. "Hearing five different languages – or more – spoken right here, and different accents; different clothes, like the sari and hijab, for example. That's what I love about this place, and about Flint."

Within the university, recent efforts to provide social and cultural opportunities have produced a ski trip, a Pistons game and a trip to Mackinac Island. Daniel Adams, director of the university's International Center (IC), says he is determined to enable students to "make this their home."

Often working with other offices on campus, Adams says the IC, created in 2005 as the International Student Center and given its current name in 2008, strives to ensure the presence of important services, such as academic advising and linguistic assistance, all in the interest of creating and sustaining an international community of scholars.

Staff writer Andrew Keast can be reached at akeast@umflint.edu.



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Reactions mixed to Carriage Town boundary change

By Nic Custer

Before stepping down at the end of April, Emergency Manager Gerald Ambrose adopted a controversial boundary change to the Carriage Town Historic District.

The change to chapter 2, section 143 of the code of ordinances enacted April 28 moved the historic district's western boundary two blocks east from Begole Street to Grand Traverse Street. This results in Carriage Town shrinking by ten blocks and no longer including Atwood Stadium.

In addition to the ordinance change, that same day Ambrose enacted 40 resolutions ranging from approval of individual home sales in Smith Village, to purchasing bulk salt and authorizing budget amendments.

Jason Lorenz, the City of Flint's public information officer, said when state-appointed emergency managers leave office they try to wrap up as many outstanding issues as possible to allow for an easier transition to the next administrator.

Lorenz said the documentation concerning the Carriage Town recommendations was found to be sufficient to warrant the change.

Tim Monahan, who has lived on Begole Street for a decade and was on the Carriage Town Historic District Boundary Review Committee, said the boundary change was originally his idea. Two years ago, he presented it to the University Avenue Corridor Coalition. Emergency Manager Michael Brown formed a review committee to determine the viability of the idea in September 2013.

Monahan said he has watched nine Hurley Medical Center-owned houses on and around Stone Street and Fourth Avenue deteriorate. The houses have sat vacant for nearly 20 years, beginning in 1996.

"Demolition by neglect"

He said many of the properties suffered from "demolition by neglect." Although one structure was destroyed by arson, eight of the vacant houses remain.

He said everyone he has talked to except one resident of the affected area agrees with the decision. He and other residents would have preferred not to have to move the boundary but he believed nothing was going to happen with the Hurley-owned properties and he saw a unique opportunity with the emergency manager to get something done outside of the control of a potentially divisive city council.

City Council President Joshua Freeman, who represents the Fourth Ward, asserted in an email that communities are better served when they are able to make decisions through

the people they elected. There is more accountability and decisions are more reflective of what the community wants.

But he said he also thinks Flint has historically done a poor job of maximizing the opportunities historic districts offer.

"While I understand some of the frustrations that institutions like Hurley and Kettering may have in trying to move forward with their plans within the district, the city could have done a better job of finding a way forward in helping them meet their needs while still working within the requirements of the district," Freeman said. "These districts should be seen as an asset to improving our community, not a hindrance."

The review committee's report states that Hurley's original plan was to demolish the properties and build new residential and assisted-living facilities on the site. But they were unable to demolish the properties because of the district's restrictions so they boarded them up and left them vacant.

Hurley Chief Financial Officer Cass Wisniewski said the hospital plans to demolish the remaining properties as soon as possible and turn the lots into green space. The work will begin after they receive demolition permits from the city and will be done ideally by the end of summer. He said he could not comment on the original plans for the sites because they were drafted before he began working for the hospital.

But Wisniewski said the current plan is to beautify the area, which has been a safety concern for some time. He said the homes have had to be boarded weekly due to trespassers.

The historic district review committee included Monahan, Myron Shelton, Sally Jaeger, John Bourbeau and Heather Burnash. Burnash, a historic district commissioner, strongly opposed the group's findings.

CTHNA opposed change

A January 16 memo from the Carriage Town Historic Neighborhood Association (CTHNA) Board of Directors to Ambrose also rejected the study's findings. The memo notes the report did not discuss any potential negative impacts of the change, including the loss of historic tax credits and historic district code enforcement mechanisms. It claims multiple individuals were misquoted or "credited with opinions that have not been endorsed or vetted by the institutions/organizations." It also cites staff comments from the State Historic Preservation Office in November that the study committee's role is to document the history and sig-

nificance of the area and to review the district as a whole. It suggested boundaries should be developed based on history, significance and integrity, not on proposed use or development.

CTHNA Vice President Michael Freeman said the city did not initiate a formal evaluation of the viability of the whole district and the move's impact, the process used to evaluate a similar proposal to change Civic Park's boundary several years ago.

"Essentially, if this was supposed to determine how to preserve the area that has not been negatively impacted by Hurley's land management practices, this was like doing surgery with a butcher's knife instead of a scalpel," he said.

Atwood upgrades coming

John McGarry, Atwood Stadium director for Kettering University, said he was pleased with the change. He said it will strengthen the new western boundary of Carriage Town by including fewer deteriorated houses.

Although he was unsure of the university's plans moving forward, he said he personally thinks there are at least two vacant structures along the stadium's east end that should be torn down, making the area more inviting.

Atwood is being upgraded with state-of-the-art turf to make it safer and more level for players. The stadium will eventually host football, soccer and lacrosse games for Flint Southwestern, Flint Northwestern and Powers Catholic high schools as well as intra-mural and club sports for Kettering students.

Although the newly-opened Tenacity Brewing, housed in the Market Fire House, is located on the west side of Grand Traverse Street, it will retain its historic district protection as part of a separate Water Street designation. The Water Street historic buildings include the Durant-Dort Office Building, Nash House and Carriage Factory District.

Monahan has spoken with several neighbors about starting a new neighborhood association between Grand Traverse Street and Mott Park. This new group would be called the University Avenue Neighborhood Association. There is currently no neighborhood group between the two areas. Monahan would like to get the group running in the next several months.

Michael Freeman said CTHNA discussed the change at its May meeting and he does not think they will shrink the association's boundaries despite the historic district change.

... Magic

(Continued from Page 3.)

At least she came back in one piece.

That might not be true of our trust in Michigan's politics.

Paul Rozycki is a professor of political science at Mott Community College. He has lived in Flint since 1969 and has been involved with and observed Flint politics for many years. He is author of Politics and Government in Michigan (with Jim Hanley) and A Clearer Image: The History of Mott Community College.

... Filmmaker

(Continued from Page 8.)

consumers can no longer consume without consciousness," he says. "As unpleasant as films like mine are, not fun to sit and watch, we have to be aware of the consequences of our actions."

"We can't ask questions about everything we eat and buy, but if we begin, just begin to demand enough, let's say by paying the five dollars extra for that phone that is socially-made, the corporations are going to listen."

Ramsdell calls himself "a socially conscious entrepreneur" and says he believes in capitalism – for pragmatic reasons. Government regulation is not the answer, he contends. It's the consumer – the power of money – that really holds the key to change.

"We have to be aware of what our money is doing," he asserts. "Our consumer's voice is the most important voice we have. Eventually, the corporations will get the message. They are the tail, and we are the dog."

Jan Worth-Nelson is the editor of East Village Magazine. She is also a novelist, essayist and poet and 34-year resident of Flint.



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... CCNA

(Continued from Page 4.)

deputize residents to write code violations, an opportunity Herriman said he wants neighborhood volunteers to take up. Herriman said addressing code violations could help solve bigger problems.

In addition to code violations, Hunter encouraged residents to report rental houses that may not be registered with the city. Registration includes an inspection of the property and a follow up to ensure violations are being addressed.

She said the city is considering an amnesty program for landlords who have not registered their rental properties, according to Hunter. Fines would be waived so that landlords could "get right with the law," Hunter said. She added that only 25-30% of rentals are currently registered. Hunter hopes to increase that number to 80-90%. She encouraged residents to report suspected rentals and code violations to Raul Garcia, the city's blight coordinator, at 810-237-2090.

Hunter said neighborhood groups that help maintain city parks are greatly appreciated. The city has an annual parks budget of \$300,000, and has 60 parks, 3 youth centers, and 4 public golf courses, according to Hunter. "We can only pay the basic utilities and mow twice a month," she said.

In terms of code enforcement or park maintenance, Hunter said, "We're willing to empower groups that can do some of that." She added that her department has resources including dumpsters or chippers available for neighborhood clean-ups.

In other news, President Mike Keeler, Vice President Sherry Hayden, Secretary John Cherry were reelected and Annette Fechik was elected treasurer.

The group will meet next at 7 p.m. September 17 at MCC's RTC auditorium.

Staff writer Ashley O'Brien can be reached at am.obrien@rocketmail.com.

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Village Life

“Power of story” can change the world, filmmaker says

By Jan Worth-Nelson

During three visits spanning six months in the Democratic Republic of Congo, documentary filmmaker Mike Ramsdell, a Flint native, trekked through violence-riddled cities, remote bush villages and labyrinthine mines.

He traveled by motorcycle or on foot, with only the gear he could carry on his back, sleeping where he could — under a

bush, in a hut — eating “cassava and unknown meats,” whatever was available. His only crew was a “fixer,” a trusted guide, middleman and translator.

The reason was to document the story of “conflict minerals,” a story Ramsdell calls “the worst human atrocity on Planet Earth.” It is, as his work grippingly reveals, a collusion of corrupt industry, government and the military that has left more than 6 million dead over the last 15 years.

The result is *When Elephants Fight*, Ramsdell’s second full-length film, premiered at the Flint Institute of Art May 28 to a warmly supportive audience of old friends, family and former teachers.

From here Ramsdell hopes the film, narrated by actress Robin Wright, will be shown widely around the country, passionately asserting his message that “If you want to change reality, you must first change the story.”

The title is from a Swahili proverb: “When elephants fight, the grass suffers.” The film vividly documents how the Congolese are continually hurt and exploited, caught between colluding industries, governments, and the military.

He hopes the film will wake up viewers to what is happening in a war over tin, tungsten, tantalum and gold.

They are the essential parts of cell phones, laptops, and tablets. The Congo is rich in all four minerals, and corporations making deals with corrupt officials are enriched by the profits.

But miners working in life-threatening conditions are making less than two dollars a day, and the country’s populace languishes in poverty and extreme violence.

Over lunch (no cassava) at a café in Brighton, where he now lives, Ramsdell said none of it has been easy. He has never been deluded about the career he has chosen, in particular as a filmmaker striving to be “socially conscious.”

“You’re trying to tell a story that nobody wants you to tell,” he says. “You’re trying to raise money that you’re pretty sure is not going to make its money back. And then once you have the product, you’re trying to use it to change massive global forces that don’t want to change.”

It’s just part of the job, he says. That, and the danger involved in climbing on his hands and knees through dark mines, hanging out with rebels, and worrying about the safety of his “fixers.”

But with the resilience and determination one might expect from a kid raised by com-

munity engagement torchbearers Richard and Betty Ramsdell in Flint, he plunged into the challenge, believing in the “power of story” to change the world.

Ramsdell, now 41, thinks Flint had something to do with his life commitments, his art, and his concern for social change — which is why he chose to premier the movie here.

“Flint — I don’t know what it is,” he said, reflecting on his childhood on Kensington Avenue and his experiences at Central High. “In Flint it’s culturally engrained that you are your brother’s keeper — that it’s a community. It’s unspoken. I can’t remember people sitting me down and giving me those lessons, but I knew it.”

He says while Flint had its “Dickensian” aspects, it was an “awesome” place to grow up — kids playing in the street, having lunch at each other’s houses, riding bikes everywhere.

“It was fantastic for me,” he said, including his experience in the gifted program at Central — he graduated in ’91 — and having teachers like Martin Jennings, Joe Eufinger and Sue Goering — and of course, his own father, who taught social studies.

After a year at Western Michigan, Ramsdell spent three years as an actor in Chicago, before realizing he wanted the options — the power, he says — of a director. After earning a Bachelor of Fine Arts in directing from the North Carolina School for the Arts, he established Under the Hood Productions and quickly demonstrated his passion for challenging material.

In filming his 2009 film, *Anatomy of Hate: A Dialogue to Hope*, he embedded himself among white supremacists, anti-gay activists, Christian and Muslim fundamentalists and others, probing extremism with an unfailingly clear eye.

Ramsdell and *Anatomy* were featured at more than 100 college campuses, generating the kind of dialogue he hopes his new film will catalyze.

The same year *Anatomy* came out, he went to the Congo as a photographer — helping out on somebody else’s project. He was blown away by what he saw happening in the African nation, and determined the story of conflict minerals would be his next film.

“Social consciousness” is his watchword — an ethos that calls for business and industry to operate with regard to the health, safety and human rights of their workers and with respect for the Earth.

“I want to say this: we are at a point that

(Continued on Page 7.)

My Kunisada* Print

By Grayce Scholt

Wikipedia says that Kunisada made twenty, thirty thousand beauties priming, chatting, wrapped in obi sashes, silk kimonos, whitened faces hiding flaws,

tabi socks beside them, geta sandals, whitening brushes for the women Kunisada fashioned on a thousand, thousand woodblocks in old Edo long ago.

Today above my mantel in my Kunisada print four white faces primp forever, chattering like Eastern jackdaws, nattering, clattering confirming ancient Nippon adage: “Fair complexions cover seven flaws.”

*Kunisada was the most popular, prolific woodblock artist of 19th century Japan. Thirty percent of his thousands of designs were *Bijin-ga* (pictures of beautiful women with traditional whitened faces.)

Grayce Scholt is a retired English professor from Mott College who wrote art reviews for the *Flint Journal*. Her book of poetry, *Bang! Go All the Porch Swings*, is available online from Amazon and from Pages Bookstore in downtown Flint. A personal narrative of the poet’s life in Europe in the early 1950s, *Vienna, Only You*, is available from the author at gscholt09@comcast.net. The author’s new book of poems, *Night Song*, is available from Friesen Press (www.friesenpress.com) and Amazon.