



Historical Society

## *Dwight Historical Society Newsletter*

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### **Happy New Year**

#### **A review of Dwight Historical Society 2025**

The Historical Society had an eventful year, offering a variety of well-attended and well-received programs and activities. Bill Pearch began our schedule in April with a presentation about Dwight area baseball players who made it to the major leagues; this was followed in May by a vintage baseball game featuring 1858 rules. In June, Joy Ahern organized a tour for DHS members of the Farnsworth House, designed by Mies van der Rohe. Our 2025 exhibit, "From the Deutschland to Dwight," launched in August with a program highlighting local residents whose ancestors were among the area's early German settlers. The festivities concluded with a lively German band and German beer, both crowd favorites. Later in August, John Wille presented a Route 66 program, discussing its history and significance. And finishing up our programs, in October, Patti Drechsel delivered an engaging talk about the Keeley Institute—a consistently popular subject and key chapter in Dwight's history.

The end of the year also brought an important issue to the forefront: the future of the Pioneer Gothic Church. The Pioneer Gothic Church is one of Dwight's most significant historical buildings. The future King of England attended services in the church in 1860 when he visited the Dwight area as a young Prince of Wales, and that visit to America was the first time a British royal had been on American soil. The Gothic church was previously under the ownership of the Historical Society. However, as the Historical Society does not possess tax authority or the financial resources required for the building's maintenance, the organization resolved in 1977 to transfer the deed of the property to Dwight Township, subject to specific restrictions.



The township maintained and utilized the church for nearly fifty years. This year, the township acquired a new facility to serve as its hall, and the board now intends to sell the Gothic Church.

In order to sell the Gothic Church, the township asked that the Historical Society agree to remove certain restrictions that were included in the deed. At a special meeting of the Historical Society on November 17, 2025, the membership voted unanimously to refuse the request for the removal of the restrictive covenants. The Historical Society requested that the township continue to own the building while the Historical Society investigates avenues to finance the upgrading of the building and to eventually transfer the ownership to an organization or entity that could maintain the Pioneer Gothic Church on a long-term basis. Kevin McNamara, a historical society member, volunteered to spearhead that endeavor.

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### **Timeline of Dwight's Pioneer Gothic Church**

1857-The Presbyterians constructed, on land donated by R.P. Morgan, the first church built in Dwight at a cost of \$2,650.

1858-The church was dedicated.

1860-The Prince of Wales, future King Edward VII, visited the Gothic Church.

1891-93-The building was used by the Keeley Company as a club room.

1893-The Norwegian and Danish Methodist Episcopal Church purchased the church for \$700.

1924-The church was sold to the Christian Science Society.

1956-The Calvary Baptist bought the church.

1964-Oscar and Alwina Jensen bought the church.

1966-Charles D. McWilliams donated \$6,264 to the newly formed Dwight Historical Society in memory of his uncle, Edward McWilliams, for the purchase of the building. The Historical Society raised \$29,000 for the complete restoration.

1977-In order to assure its future care, the DHS voted to give this landmark to Dwight Township to be used for their township hall and other civic needs. James Oughton, President of the Society, presented a deed to Clement Steichen, Superintendent of Dwight Township. A Town Hall Board was appointed to manage and maintain the building.

1983-The Pioneer Gothic Church was listed on the National Register. Only a handful of Carpenter Gothic churches remain intact.

2007-The American Institute of Architects selected the church as one of “150 Great Places in Illinois.”

2018-The American Institute of Architects named the church one of the “Illinois 200 Great Places.”

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## Preview of the Dwight Historical Society 2026 Exhibit:

### 100 Year Anniversary of Route 66

Route 66 celebrates its 100-year anniversary in 2026 with a National Kick-Off in Springfield, Missouri on April 30. Statewide celebrations and special commemorations will be held throughout the year to honor the famous “Mother Road”. Even the United States Post Office is getting in the spirit with soon-to-be released Route 66 Stamps.

The Dwight Historical Society is organizing a new exhibit about Route 66, highlighting the gas stations and restaurants found in Dwight along the famous highway. Joy

Ahern, a Historical Society member, is making a custom quilt that showcases Illinois Route 66 with an emphasis on Dwight, which will be raffled off. Additionally, a small pottery dish with Route 66 in the center is being produced and will be available for purchase.

For the past eighteen years, Illinois has celebrated Route 66 through the Red Carpet Corridor Festival. This year, the event is scheduled for May 2–3. Sponsored by the fifteen communities along the 100-mile stretch from Joliet to Bloomington – including Dwight – the festival features historic sites, car shows, community garage sales, and various local events. Participants can experience this nostalgic journey highlighting the historical significance of Route 66.



Route 66 had its official beginnings in 1926 as part of the first U.S. federal highway system, connecting Chicago to Santa Monica, California. It was initially built from existing roads and wasn't fully paved until 1938. It stretched through eight states: Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California and covered approximately 2,400 miles. The road was decommissioned in 1985 after being entirely replaced by the Interstate Highway System.

### *Historical Wanderings.... Dwight businesses along Route 66*



Texaco Station : On the left --- "Tubby" Ambler and his wife Lorraine



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*"Smile, Life's Worth While"*

L & M Shell station and restaurant  
I loved going there for breakfast  
after Sunday church.



McNamara's Standard Oil: My grandfather,  
Tom McNamara, standing in the doorway.

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*Members: If you have photos, stories, or memories of Route 66 to share, please send them to me at [jmacneville@gmail.com](mailto:jmacneville@gmail.com)*