

## ELMHURST HISTORY HIGHLIGHT: Elmhurst Historian Helmut Berens

Helmut A. Berens was born on November 29, 1884 in Washington, Missouri, but arrived in Elmhurst with his parents in 1887 after his father, August, was assigned to be pastor at St. Peter's Church. Rather than following in his father's clerical footsteps, Helmut chose the profession of school teacher. After graduating from the University of Chicago in 1906, Berens taught German at the high school in Bloomington for one year before accepting a position at the Lewis Institute (now the Illinois Institute of Technology) and returned to his residence in Elmhurst, where he lived for the rest of his life. He married a fellow University of Chicago graduate, Alice Seton, in 1911.

In 1917, Berens joined the faculty of Austin High School in Chicago. It was there that he pioneered the teaching of journalism at the high school level. Berens was one of the first presidents of the Quill and Scroll International Honorary Society for High School Journalists, founded in 1926 by pollster George Gallup. Outside of his professional life, Berens also started the first Boy Scout troop in Elmhurst, serving as scoutmaster from 1914 through 1917. After 44 years, he retired from the teaching profession in 1950. That same year, he was appointed to the role of Educational Director at the Chicago Historical Society, helping to develop the Chicago History Museum's education department.

In his later years, Berens took on a role as the unofficial historian of Elmhurst. In the early 1940s, he was elected president of the DuPage County Historical Society, a position he held until 1960. Berens was instrumental in the creation of the [Elmhurst Historical Commission](#) in 1952, which opened the door to the city hosting its own local history museum. In 1957, the commission opened the Elmhurst Historical Museum on the third floor of the [Glos Mansion](#), which at that time served as Elmhurst City Hall. Berens was the first director of the museum, and was awarded "Elmhurst Citizen of the Year" in 1957 by the Elmhurst Jaycees. His programs on the early years of Elmhurst's history were widely attended, and were also broadcast on the Elmhurst College radio station.

In his final years, Berens wrote a series of essays that encompassed the 19<sup>th</sup>-century history of Elmhurst. He had hoped to publish the collection as a book, but passed away in 1964 before he could see the project through the end. Following his death, his wife Alice and the Elmhurst Historical Commission saw to it that his work was finished. The book was published under his name in 1968, titled *Elmhurst: Prairie*



*Helmut Berens circa 1952, M2014.1.379*

*to Tree Town*, and was the first publication on Elmhurst's history. The volume is still used as a reference at the Elmhurst History Museum and is available to check out at the Elmhurst Public Library.

In 1967, the Elmhurst Park District named a recently developed park in honor of Elmhurst's unofficial historian. Berens Park still bears that name today.

*By Daniel Lund, Elmhurst History Museum staff, November 2021*