

*Biography
Pinkerton, Allen*

OUTINGS

Famous detective called
West Dundee home

By Julie Hanna

Along the quiet streets of West Dundee, its tall trees, trim Victorian homes and quaint downtown stretched picturesquely on the hilly banks of the Fox River, a comforting placidity reigns.

There's nothing mysterious about the town or the surrounding river valley. Nothing to suggest the sort of skullduggery that would spawn the nation's most famous detective.

But in the roguish intrigues of pre-industrial America, the days when law enforcement was a loose amalgam of volunteer night watchmen and thinly dispersed rural sheriffs, a local barrelmaker and social activist named Allan Pinkerton got his first taste of gumshoeing one night in 1847.

Pinkerton lived in many places before and after he lived in West Dundee. Born in Scotland, he emigrated in 1842, went to Canada, then to Chicago before coming to the river hamlet to open a cooperage and join Dundee's active abolitionist movement.

Pinkerton was cutting hickory poles for barrel loops one evening near Carpentersville when he discovered a cache of counterfeit money at "Bogus Island" on the Fox River. He summoned the Geneva sheriff and, newly deputized, Pinkerton aided the lawmen in the ensuing capture of the counterfeiter.

Two years later Pinkerton moved back to Chicago, opened his first detective agency and found no shortage of clients in the fledgling industry.

By the late 1850s, he had become a special agent for the Treasury Department and Abraham Lincoln's personal bodyguard. Working for the Union during the Civil War, he was named the first head of the U.S. Secret Service before returning to Pinkerton's National Detective Agency, by then headquartered in New York.

The agency would become famous in its own right for its roles in infiltrating labor unions, monitoring thefts on railroads and going after some of the 19th Century's most notorious criminals, such as the James gang. And while Pinkerton died in 1884, the company, now called Pinkerton's Inc., survives with offices in Mt. Prospect, Westchester and Merrillville, Ind.

West Dundee has not forgotten its most famous citizen, though. Clues to Pinkerton's past are entwined with the town's history at the Dundee Township Historical



Flock illustration

Society Museum. The worn stucco building at 426 Highland Ave. lies adjacent to the village's oldest cemetery, where two of Pinkerton's brothers are buried. (Pinkerton himself is entombed in New York.) No descendants of the family are known to be living in the Dundee area, according to Historical Society volunteer Nancy Wendt. Nor is his small frame house and cooperage still standing. A state monument placard marks the site on Third Street, just off the corner of Main.

Aside from the marker and the family grave stones, there is little tangible evidence of Pinkerton's existence in Dundee other than the worn volumes and exhibits at the Historical Society.

The society opened an exhibit, "Military History and Record of Dundee Township," earlier this year, displaying Civil War relics along with military uniforms from World Wars I and II and the Vietnam War.

The exhibit also features Pinkerton memorabilia, including a faded print of the detective with President Lincoln at Antietam in 1862.

The library upstairs, open to visitors by appointment, holds musty books and documents pertaining to the history of Dundee Township, including books by Pinkerton, and the notebooks and manuscript of a Pinkerton biography written by local historian Irma Frances Dupre.

The never-married Dupre, who died in 1980 at the age of 89, spent years researching Pinkerton's life. Faded ring-bound notebooks contain what appears to be a complete manuscript of his life story. Neat proofreading marks stud the double margins of the manually typed text. The galleys are as interesting for their nostalgic look at a devoted author's work as they are a meticulous guide to Pinkerton's life.

The final paragraph of her preface reads: "And so 'The Canny Cooper' goes into print far short of the elusive 'cooper' who will continue to haunt my mind and intrigue my fancy, I suppose, forever more. I offer it 'as is,' however, in the trust that my critics will take the will for the deed. I have done my best to give a new generation an interesting and inspiring Allan Pinkerton."

Members of the Historical Society do not know why the book was never published.

The Dundee Township Historical Society Museum, 426 Highland Ave., West Dundee; 708-428-6996. Hours are 2 to 4 p.m. Sunday and Wednesday. There is a \$1 entrance fee for adults.