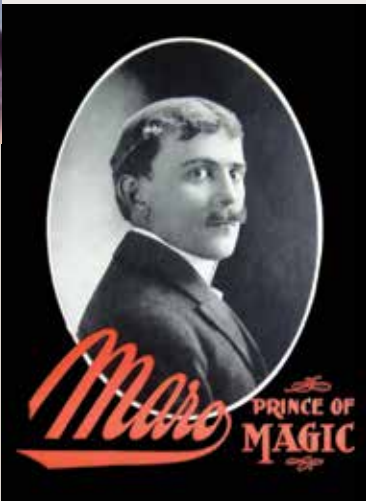


1922 - 1939 OUR ORIGIN STORY

BY MARY STEWART

In 2022 we mark the centennial of the creation of the Old Art Building in Leland. In honor of its founder, Allie Mae Best, we are pleased to tell our origin story. Let us begin by traveling in our imaginations to the year 1869 to consider how it all began.

Our Founder, Alice Mae Kaiser, was born in the river town of St. Charles, Illinois to Augustus C. Kaiser a civil war veteran and later a successful businessman, and Lucy Whipple, a highly revered Civil War nurse. Growing up in a comfortable, mid-western household, but in an era then lacking publicly funded schools, Allie Mae very likely started primary school in private homes or perhaps in rooms on upper floors of businesses. Instruction probably would have consisted of classes in reading, writing, penmanship, geography and mathematics. By 1885, when Allie was 16, the first two combination primary and secondary public schools opened in St. Charles and she most



The steamship Missouri docked in Leland

Allie Mae Kaiser first met Walter T. Best at Irwin Hall, St. Charles, Illinois, who was performing there as Maro, Prince of Magic.

likely would have attended one of these high schools. Allie Mae was a self-described voracious reader and, along with her love of literature, also studied music and art. In 1901 the Mahatma Newsletter reported that Allie Mae was college educated. While there are no definitive records to confirm this statement, Wheaton College or Northwestern College were close enough for Allie Mae to have attended, likely by horse drawn carriage. But however she might have come by her interest in and love for the arts, this young woman's interests led down a path that changed her life in a significant way, and many years later, impacted our lives as well.

One evening Maro performed at the Irwin Hall in St. Charles, Illinois. It was there that Walter T. Best met Alice Mae Kaiser and in 1899 they married. Thereafter she traveled with him, even briefly assisting him in his magic performances. St. Charles residents were so taken with Maro's fame that they adopted him as a native son.

Opportunities Up North

On top of his many other interests, Maro was an avid angler. By 1900, reports trickling back from lumbermen in northern Michigan had begun to reach Chicago. They told of abundant fishing and hunting opportunities up

But however she might have come by her interest in and love for the arts, this young woman's interests led down a path that changed her life in a significant way, and many years later, impacted our lives as well.

A Magical Connection

At the end of the nineteenth century, the Chicago-based Slayton Lyceum Bureau was a booking agency that sent educators and performers to residents of rural communities. Lecturing in art, history, and science, the Lyceum found eager learners in nearly eight thousand towns. In its heyday, very popular performers and lecturers could make nearly continuously uninterrupted tours throughout the Midwest. In 1892 The Lyceum signed a contract with Walter T. Best who was its first magician. Best eventually became known nationally as "Maro, Prince of Magic," and found fame as one of the most talented magicians of his time. This multi-talented performer formed his own troupe, wrote and played music, and designed new magic illusions. As a national celebrity he dominated the field and commanded an astounding income for the time, for example earning over \$3,000 in one month in 1906.

north in Michigan. More and more tourists arrived, hotels were built to accommodate the influx, and the character of towns like Leland slowly began to shift. By the late 1800's Leland's vigorous lumbering era was coming to a close and the town became more reliant on agriculture and tourism. Early in 1900, Walter and Allie Mae Best were among the venturesome new tourists coming to recreate and to view the sights. They likely traveled from Chicago by steamship, a mode of travel growing in popularity on the Great Lakes at that time. The steamship Missouri docked in Manistee and later in Leland. A railway from Manistee to Traverse City was extended via Fouch Landing and included a hotel on south Lake Leelanau. It is highly probable that the couple used that approach upon their first visit to Leland as they explored the area.

Allie Mae Best occasionally traveled with her husband to assist in his magic performances. Pictured here: Walter T. Best is at right. The figures in the middle are speculated to be Alanzo Moore and Allie Mae Best. The identity of the gentleman at left is not known.



Allie Mae and her husband, the now-famous Maro, returned the following year in 1901, and hired a small steamboat, the Tiger, moored on north Lake Leelanau, to further explore the lake for a home site. A beautiful location was secured and they built a home that Allie named Maro Nook. The ensuing years at Maro Nook allowed Allie and Walter to design and furnish this unique dwelling to accommodate their shared interests in music, painting, sketching, boating, fishing, riding, and gardening. They entertained frequently and together were known for their generosity and hospitality.

Maro Nook became the site of concerts and performances, and it was likely that hosting cultural events like these helped Allie to engage with many like-minded people in the community. (More about this shortly!) Once their home was established, Allie chose to remain in Leland while Walter continued to perform as Maro, locally engaging audiences in Traverse City, Suttons Bay, Northport, Maple City and in Leland.

Maro Nook became the site of concerts and performances, and it was likely that hosting cultural events like these helped Allie to engage with many like-minded people in the community.

Maro also resumed traveling throughout the country, however, he continued to summer in Leland, and while in residence made extensive purchases of land over a short period. He accumulated in excess of twenty properties along Brady's Point, East Leland, and Shorewood, north of town. Best/Maro's role as both a businessman and an artist turned out to be formative for the Leland community.

This was the couple's lifestyle for several years, customarily wintering in Florida. Then in 1908, when Allie Mae returned to Maro Nook, Maro proceeded up the East Coast performing as planned. Tragically, he contracted typhoid fever while on tour and after several weeks of illness, died at age 39 in Philadelphia, PA on February 26th with Allie Mae at his side. Walter T. Best was buried in the family plot in St. Charles.

A Memorial in the Making

It was long his wish that Allie continue their shared dream to develop and improve Leland. Over the next two years, after settling the estate and disposing of Maro's many artifacts and gear from his years as a performer, Allie Mae undertook her new life in Leland. Her mother, Lucy Whipple, twice widowed, came to live with her as did her husband's former magic apprentice, Alanzo Moore. This was the composition of the Best household in 1910.

On the occasion of Walter's death, one of the condolence calls Allie Maro (as she preferred to be called) had received in 1908 was from Mrs. J. C. Morgan of Traverse City. As head of the Federation of the Women's Clubs, Mrs. Morgan encouraged Allie to form the Walter T. Best Women's Club in Leland in honor of her late husband.



Maro Nook housed many cultural activities, allowing Allie to connect with like-minded people.



Beginning in 1909, through the Walter T. Best Womens Club, Allie Mae ardently pursued her goal of raising funds to build a community center in Leland. A club erected in her husband's memory would honor all of the things they loved to do together.

Allie Mae felt this idea would perfectly fulfill a memorial for Walter. Much later, in a 1922 fundraising letter, Allie outlined the history of the Walter T. Best Women's Club to a donor saying "the Club was organized in 1908, in 1911 it was 'federated' with the state, and in 1913 it was incorporated, and organized to encourage better citizenship."

In 1911 Allie Mae Best married Dr. Ora A. Chappelle, a dentist who lived and worked in Elgin, Illinois. Apparently, this marriage wasn't as happy as her first; the couple lived apart for ten years until Allie Mae divorced Chappelle in 1921.

A Visionary Land Purchase

Beginning in 1909, through the Walter T. Best Women's Club, Allie Mae ardently pursued her goal of raising funds to build a community center in Leland. A club erected in her husband's memory would honor all of the things they loved to do together. We know funds started to be raised at least since 1910, because in 1911, the Leelanau Enterprise announced that under the management of Mrs. Maro, a four day "Entertainment" organized by the Walter T. Best Women's Club was to take place under a tent in the village of Leland. Proceeds would go to the Club treasury and entertainments would equal "in every particular" those given last year." This included soloists, orchestra, dance, enactments, a violin duet, illusionists, and many other kinds of performance.

Throughout the ensuing years club members hosted meetings in their respective homes offering lunch and entertainments and reported on fundraising plans. The Leelanau Enterprise frequently announced meetings, in particular one with "twenty ladies present."

Allie Mae made a very visionary and historic land purchase in 1915 which secured the property where the present day Old Art Building now stands. Four lots were sold to Allie by Hulda Warner (Mrs. Henry Warner) and deeded to the Walter T. Best Women's Club. The purchase price was \$3,000.

Although we don't know why, Allie eventually sold Maro Nook in 1921 to Harry P. Harrison the director of the Chicago-based Lyceum Bureau. She would have known him well as the person who first contracted Maro and scheduled his tours. Upon completion of the sale, she moved to a cottage on Lake Leelanau called The Birches. Three years later she opened the Blue Lantern Tea Room in a cottage next door, operated by Alanzo Moore, Maro's old friend and assistant. It advertised serving luncheons and dinners "for people of good taste" and opened in 1924 a short distance north of Leland. Allie Mae was an entrepreneurial force: she bought and sold real estate, opened and ran the Blue Lantern, managed the Redpath Chautauqua programs, and even garnered one vote as Judge of Probate for Leland, in addition to spearheading the construction of what is now the Old Art Building.



Above: The Walter T. Best Women's Club logo



The Blue Lantern Tea Room, 1924, with Maro's former magic apprentice Alanzo Moore



John George Buehrer was the master carpenter in the construction of the Old Art Building, then known as The Leland Community Club.

Finally, in 1921, the Walter T. Best Women's Club members raised the last \$2,000 and construction of the building began in the spring of 1922. Master carpenter John Buehrer headed the crew. The result was a charming, rough-hewn, wood-frame building graciously set well back from the main street with wooden floors, a fieldstone fireplace, and a curved stage. The completed venue, known as The Leland Community Club (for both women and men) hosted social and cultural events during the 1920's and 1930's. For example, the 1922 Leland Follies was a huge success, raising significant funds for the building. These fifteen minute skits boasted elaborate costumes and scenery all organized and performed by community members. Other events included historical re-enactments or "pageants," in which "Miss Leelanau" arrived attended by the personifications of Civic Pride, Thrift, Fertility, Courage, Peace, Wealth, and Tolerance, among others. All manner of events continued to take place at the new community center: dances, funerals, banquets, readings, operettas, a sewing committee, bazaars, birthday parties, and more.

End of an Era

Success and prosperity did not last long, however, as the looming Great Depression and World War II interrupted the dream. Despite the unforeseen ravages of the Great Depression (1929 – 1939), this wonderful building has stood the test of time. At the close of the 1930's the demands to organize and operate the building exceeded the resources that Leland alone could provide. It was necessary to find a solution that would prevent the

At the close of the 1930's the demands to organize and operate the building exceeded the resources that Leland alone could provide. It was necessary to find a solution that would prevent the closure of the valued gathering space.



Allie Mae at home

closure of the valued gathering space. Entrusting its future and custodianship to the Art School of an established institution such as Michigan State College of Agriculture and Applied Science (MAC) promoted the best outcome for continued operation.

The arrival upon the scene of Professor Erling Brauner of Michigan State College, who represented its art department, was an auspicious development for the building's future. He contacted Allie Mae and the women's club members with an offer: he was in search of a good location for a summer artists' colony for the Michigan State Art department. The idea to donate the building to the MSU art school was favored by both parties and gifted November 20, 1939 at a meeting of the State Board of Agriculture. Michigan State College would run summer art programs for the next 50 years.

The idea to donate the building to the MSU art school was favored by both parties and gifted November 20, 1939 at a meeting of the State Board of Agriculture. Michigan State College would run summer art programs for the next 50 years.

With the satisfying culmination of the transfer of the cherished art building to Michigan State, Allie Mae's public service to the Leland community soon neared an end. At this point Allie Mae, 70 years old, relocated to Glenwood, Florida and warmer climes to live out the remainder of her life.

But she did return to Leland on at least one occasion! It was wonderful to discover that in 1947 Allie Mae came to Leland to attend the 6th Annual MSU Summer School exhibition. Her name was among the 284 registered visitors. She signed: Mrs. A Maro, Leland.

Allie Mae Best died in Florida three years later in 1950 at age 81. She is buried in St. Charles' North Cemetery next to her beloved husband, Walter T. Best. The grave site also includes both of her parents and Maro's mother.

A Debt Owed

The values Allie Mae Best promoted have formed the foundation for what is now the Old Art Building. The values she espoused are comprised of: the importance of gathering in community, working together towards a common goal, the sparking of joy through creativity, and gaining enrichment through cultural expression.

Allie Mae Best Maro deserves grateful recognition and appreciation for her devotion and leadership in the creation of the place we know today as the Old Art Building. Her work was inspired by her belief in the importance of a culturally energized and engaged community. The building she envisioned became a source of education, enrichment, entertainment and culture, and remains so to this day.



John Buehrer arrived in Leland in 1905 where he left many landmarks. His legacy includes the Old Art Building shown above.