



The Ensign Fountain sits in Jackson's Blackman Park.
(Brad Flory/MLive.com)

JACKSON

Aging fountain a gift that lives on

Now that nothing but rubble remains of the old Consumers Power building, it suddenly becomes obvious that neighboring Blackman Park will take on a new look.

Maybe the park will be more eye-catching when freed from the shadow of a large building that crowded it for 86 years. Or perhaps it will look shabbier with an empty hole next door.

Either way, that little park holds more stories than most of us realize.

Consider the little-known story behind the park's granite centerpiece, an artifact of early 20th Century American history sent to Jackson by a philanthropic New York advertising man and a famed stage actress.

Speaking for myself, I was ignorant of that tale until last week.

The advertising man was Hermon Lee Ensign, born in 1849 and the holder of a life-long conviction that humans ought to be better protectors of domestic animals.

In 1895, he founded the National Humane Alliance, which gave "Ensign Fountains" to more than 100 cities across the United States. The fountains were intended to provide drinking water to horses, dogs and cats.

A subset of history buffs remains interested in surviving fountains scattered around the nation, and some records are preserved in the Library of Congress.

Ensign's name was on each fountain, but he died in 1899, before they were manufactured.

That's where the famous actress came in.

Minnie Maddern Fiske,

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a leading American stage actress from the 1890s until her death in 1932, was also a crusader for kindness to animals.

After Ensign died, Minnie Fiske and her husband, Harrison, became officers of the Humane Alliance and were in charge when fountains were distributed from Maine to California.

Jackson was evidently the only city in Michigan to receive an Ensign Fountain, although surrounding states had several. City government, urged on by the Town Improvement Society, accepted the free gift in 1907.

The fountain stood for decades near the old post office on Otsego Avenue, where untold numbers of horses took refreshment during labors around the city. The fountain was eventually removed and stored in pieces at Hillcrest Memorial Park cemetery.

Many people know modern-day philanthropist Betty Dahlem Desbiens was largely responsible for restoring the fountain and having it placed in Blackman Park 11 years ago.

Few people, however, know about the advertising man and actress who gave it to Jackson in the first place.

Here's hoping city leaders do all they can to maximize the new appearance of that historic little park with a granite centerpiece.