

# Buster Keaton and the Muskegon Connection

The Actors' Colony at Bluffton 1908-1938

Excerpted from the Bluffton Walking Tour brochure available in its entirety from [www.actorscolony.com](http://www.actorscolony.com)

Near the turn of the twentieth century, as the last vestiges of Muskegon's lumbering era faded from the horizon, a community that catered to theatrical entertainers was started by C.S. "Pop" Ford. Lying in the shadow of a massive dune known as Pigeon Hill in a portion of the city known as Bluffton, Ford found a captive market in the actors who performed at the summer showhouse at nearby Lake Michigan Park.

Beginning around 1903, vaudevillian performers began to summer in the area. Like many others, the Keatons discovered Muskegon during appearances at the theater in 1902 and 1905. They became enthralled with the area, and beginning in 1907, the family returned annually. For Joe, the patriarch, it was a slice of heaven. Bluffton offered a break from the constant touring associated with vaudeville. He liked the recreation offered by the lakes, the presence of other performers, and the carefree atmosphere of the area. For his wife, Myra, a passionate card player, the community offered an endless supply of pinochle partners. For his children, it was a place to call home.

On June 14, 1908, Joe Keaton and friends launched the "Artist's Colony Club" (later known as the Actors' Colony). Keaton served as president, while Paul Lucier, a comic bellhop on the vaudeville stage, held the rank of vice president. William "Mush" Rawls, a jack-of-all-trades in vaudeville, handled the duties of treasurer and secretary. Late in the summer, the group built a rustic, one-story clubhouse to serve as their headquarters. The building was located on waterfront property owned by Lew Earl, the first thespian to make Muskegon his permanent summer home. (Because of this fact, Earl carried the honorary title of Mayor of Bluffton.) Known for its exposed framework and unpainted state, the building was fittingly christened "Cobwebs and Rafters."

By 1911, over 200 performers resided in the Colony and activities included an annual vaudeville show. In 1916 a new clubhouse, the Theatrical Colony Yacht Club, was built to help handle the growing number of members and boats. In 1917, an annual regatta was added.

However, by the early 1920's, the rising importance of the film industry helped bring an end to the glory days of the Actors' Colony. The Keatons moved to California, joining their son in Hollywood. Joe Roberts, another member of the colony, was recruited by Buster to portray the "heavy" in Keaton's early films. Many others left the area to find work. By 1938, the activities of the colony had faded from the Bluffton landscape. But the memories live on.

## The Damfinos - The International Buster Keaton Society

This group gathers annually in Muskegon during the first weekend in October to celebrate the life and art of their favorite comedian. The organization was formed in 1992. Visit their website at [www.busterkeaton.com](http://www.busterkeaton.com). Learn more about the Actors' Colony at [www.actorscolony.com](http://www.actorscolony.com). Original funding for this publication provided by Community Foundation Muskegon County

## Bluffton Neighborhood Walking Tour Info

### The Tour:



A) Pascoe's Place—razed in 1960. The unofficial meeting place for Colony members, this watering hole was renown around the world for their perch dinners and nickel brews.



B) The Gardners—1845 Walnut Home of "Happy" Jack Gardner, a singer, songwriter and comic, and his wife and musical partner, Edna.



C) Millards—1852 Walnut A fiddle player, Charles "Pop" Millard, his wife Kate and their daughter Mildred worked the vaudeville circuit until 1923.



F) The Grubers—1831 Cherry The home of Max and Adele Gruber and their novelty animal act, "Oddities of the Jungle." The show featured the talents of an elephant that could bowl and ride a tricycle, a trained zebra, and a great dane. The animals were kept in a barn behind the house. Max retired from the road in the late thirties, and the barn was converted into an apartment complex christened "MEMORIES."



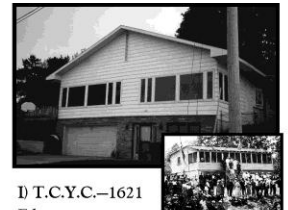
Joe and Myra Keaton stroll through the streets of Bluffton on Minnie, one of Gruber's elephants. Max is on horseback.



G) The Butowicks—3296 Wilcox Donat and Ella Butowick toured the world as "Samaroff and Sonia." Featuring gymnastic dancing and acrobatic dogs, the couple presented their act at the request of England's King George in 1913, and performed at Grauman's Chinese Theater in 1928 prior to the world premiere of Charlie Chaplin's film "The Circus."



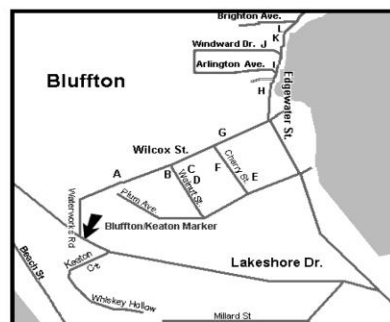
H) The Rawls —1709 Edgewater William "Mush" Rawls joined the Actors' Colony in 1905, and married his onstage partner Ella VonKauffman in 1909. The couple settled in Muskegon permanently. In 1957, "Mush" traveled from Muskegon to Hollywood to appear on the popular TV show, "This is Your Life" for an episode honoring Buster Keaton. On the show, Rawls recalled Buster's days in Bluffton as a member of the Colony.



I) T.C.Y.C.—1621 Edgewater Built in 1916 to replace the colony's original club house, the "Theatrical Colony Yacht Club" was eventually turned into a private residence.



J) The Keatons — 1579 Edgewater "Jingles Jungle" was the summer home of Joe, Myra, Buster, Louise, and Harry "Jingles" Keaton. The cottage served the family until Buster's move to Hollywood. The original structure was removed and rebuilt in the '50s.



### The Landmarks of the Actors' Colony

- A - Pascoe's - Wilcox
- B - Gardner's - 1845 Walnut
- C - Millard's - 1852 Walnut
- D - Lucier's - 1860 Walnut
- E - Earl's - 1854 Cherry
- F - Gruber's - 1831 Cherry
- G - Butowick's - 3296 Wilcox
- H - Rawls' - 1709 Edgewater
- I - TCYC - 1621 Edgewater
- J - Keaton's - 1579 Edgewater
- K - Flemen's - 1535 Edgewater
- L - Roberts' - 1545 Edgewater



Bluffton was once home to Pigeon Hill, one of the largest sand dunes on Lake Michigan.