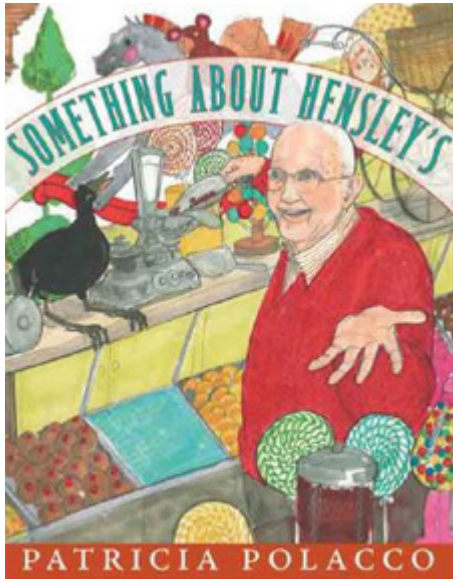


Unique area inspires literary works

By Jane Ammeson

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ONE TANK TRIP: UNION CITY, MICH.



With its Victorian era downtown and 19th century Gothic and Italian Revival homes, Union City, Mich., looks like a scene from a storybook.

Make that many storybooks.

For **Union City**, named for the convergence of the St. Joseph and Coldwater Rivers, is the home of award-winning children's book author and illustrator Patricia Polacco. Flip through her book *Something About Hensley* and it is set in the venerable Hensley's Dime Store, in business since 1946, in Union City's quaint downtown. As an aside, Hensley's carries any of Polacco's books that are still in print and you can call ahead 517.741.7150 and order one—just ask for Sharon—and Polacco will stop by and sign it so that's it ready when you arrive.

Or peruse one of the books about the Graves family such as the *Graves Family Goes Camping*, which shows their Gothic-style deep purple home with two giant gargoyles poised behind a picket fence.

Well, that home, restored by Polacco, sits just across from Meteor Ridge Farm, the large estate once a plantation house dating back to the late 1850s, where Polacco lives and keeps her menagerie of animals including a pygmy goat, a Suffolk lamb and assorted cats.

Even Meteor Ridge Farm has its own stories—though these are real. Abraham Lincoln stopped here on his way to Burlington, Mich., to make a speech and though he didn't spend the night, he walked through the rooms while the horses were being fed. And several years ago, workers digging up the garden discovered a cave with underground rooms used to hide escaping African Americans during the time of the Underground Railroad.

IF YOU GO

You'll like: Nearby Allen, called the Antique Capital of Michigan, with a huge assortment of antique barns as well as Preston's Gaslight Village, a collection of old school houses, churches and general store that used to be part of the landscape here back in the late 1800s and early 1900s and were moved to create an antique village.

Kids will like: Casting a line at the Union City's dam, a favorite spot for fishermen or having a picnic at Riverview Park on Woodruff Steet.

And don't miss: If Fido is in tow, visit the four-acre Coldwater Dog Park in nearby Coldwater, a delightful historic lakeside city with its 19th century restored opera house and Victorian era downtown filled with eclectic shops. The dog park, complete with free scoop mitten dispensers, is right on U.S. 12, a state heritage road.

How to get there: Take Interstate 80/90 East to I-69 (exit 144) north into Michigan. Travel about 15 miles and then take the M60 Jackson/Three Rivers exit. Turn left, under the freeway, heading west through Burlington, four more miles to Union City.

For more information: Branch County tourism, 517.278.0241 or discover-michigan.com; for Union City, liveinuc.com

Wander over to the Riverside Cemetery and see the large stone with the initials GAW. It's really a meteor and it fell on the Union City farm belonging to Polacco's grandparents one summer when she was visiting them. Now, used as the family headstone, the meteor's arrival is also celebrated each year in the Meteor Festival held in July and was the subject of Polacco's first book, *Meteor*.

Union City was a special place for Polacco when she was young. She used to stay here each summer and the magic never really wore off. Though she moved to California when she was in her teens and lived there for almost 40 years, she returned to Union City where she bought an Italian Revival home and turned it into her studio. She also restored a Victorian era fire station in the downtown that is hosts special events such as spook house on Halloween.

And it's easy to see the magic that brought Polacco back to Union City.

Celebrate Valentine's weekend at the **Victorian Villa Bed and Breakfast, a National Historic Register** house with turrets, wraparound porch and gables. The Villa, which

was written up in *Victoria Magazine* and also has earned ratings from *Wine Spectator* magazine, offers Valentine's packages for overnight guests as well as those just stopping by for dinner, including one which features seven course dinner and Champagne.

Ron Gibson, owner of the Villa, also owns the 19th Century Lighting Company. It's the largest stocking dealer in America of Restored Victorian Patterned Art-Glass Lighting, offering such merchandise as banquet lamps, library hanging lamps and *Gone With the Wind* Parlor Lamps.

Pick up a free walking tour map at Hensley's and wander past the historic Romanesque Revival Congregational Church, which still contains the original organ pipes from 1917, and the Soldier's Monument, a tribute to those who fought in the Civil War. Make an appointment through the Union City Historical Society, 517.741.7347, to tour the Hammond House Museum, built in 1837 by Deacon Chester Hammond. Hammond moved here in 1836. His son, Charles, became the first president of the Union Pacific. His daughter, Ellen, was the first teacher at what's called the Red School House.

Visit the **Creative Health Institute** just outside of town. Founded in 1976, it is one of the leading purveyors of wheat grass (which they grow on the premises) and a great place to learn about healthy living options.

Across the street is a former three-story mill now a private residence that sits on a mill creek. In the other direction is Countryside Quality Meats, which features a wide selection of freshly butchered meats and house-made sausages.

In the spring, the town's Rotarians gather maple syrup and sell it in town for a fundraiser. It is available at the **Meteor Festival** and other Union City events including their fireworks display on July 3 and the city-wide yard sale on July 2-3. The syrup can also be purchased at Hensley's.