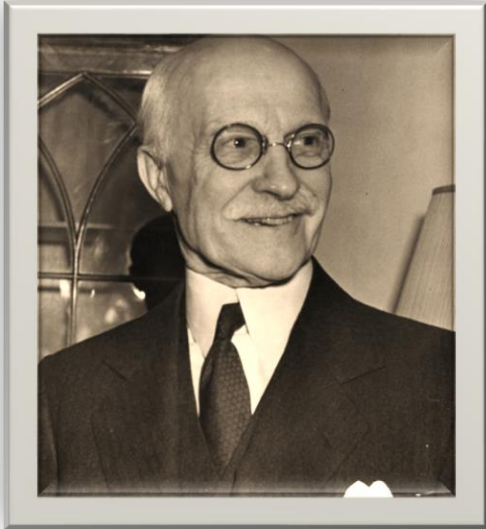


### Artifacts Tell the Lake County Story 3:

#### Salvaged Treasure

Ordinary things can tell fascinating tales, connecting us with the past. Here is the chronicle of a third Lake County artifact available for history buffs; and this one is hiding in plain sight.

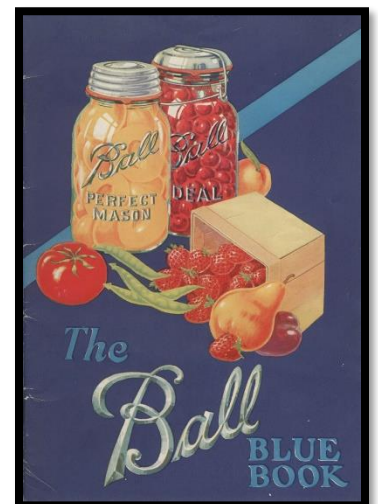


#### Mason Jars, Trains & an Iconic Havel Salvage

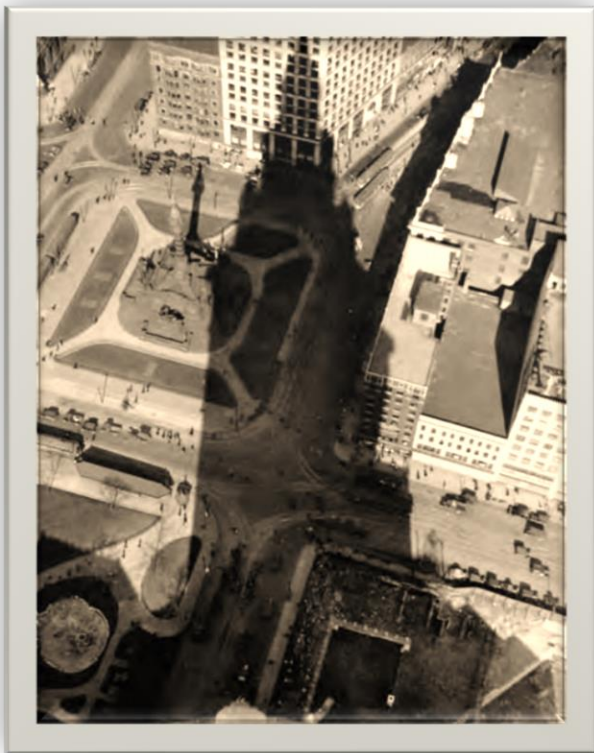
Our unusual artifact is actually the building found at 9294 Mentor Avenue. For gardeners, it is the familiar location of **Havel's Flowers & Greenhouse**. Its distinct design celebrates Lake County's former nickname as the nursery epicenter of the United States. In 1937, **Joseph Havel** salvaged this iconic ornamental glass structure from the **George A. Ball** estate near Cleveland's Gordon Park. Here is how the **Great Depression**, the **Terminal Tower** and **canning jars** brought this lovely greenhouse to be a part of Lake County's landscape.

**George A. Ball**, who hailed from Muncie, Indiana, was the youngest of five brothers. As investors, manufacturers and philanthropists, the family portfolio had holdings from furniture to automobile companies.

George, always a risk-taker, found a creative way to move the family glassmaking business to a new level when he took **John L. Mason's** recently expired patent to produce the **Ball Glass jars** familiar to every cook, gardener, canner and merchant. Not surprisingly then, George answered a business proposition in 1935 to assist two fellow entrepreneurs from Cleveland, Ohio, in desperate need of rescue.



The men wanting financial help were **O.P. and M.J. Van Sweringen**. They had moved to Cleveland in 1900 and became the visionary entrepreneurs who began developing Shaker Heights in 1909. Needing better transportation to access downtown Cleveland in order to sell their model community, the Vans expanded their enterprise to offer the **Rapid Transit**, an electric high-speed commuter rail line. To secure track access away from the city streets, they bought the **Nickel Plate Railroad** (Buffalo to St. Louis via Cleveland) in 1915.

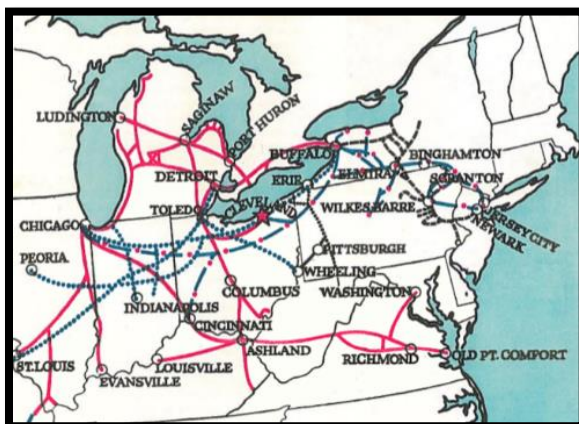


Acquiring debt and constructing a maze of holding companies, they managed their ever-expanding empire. In 1923, plans were unveiled for a union terminal for their transit line, which would also expand service to the **New York Central's** passenger trains including the famous **Twentieth Century Limited**. The building would be topped by a tall office complex to be called the **Terminal Tower**.

Throughout the 1920s, O.P. and M.J., continued to expand their riches as they bought more railroads and other enterprises. Their empire was valued at \$3 billion by 1929. (Over \$52 billion in 2023 dollars.)

In 1930, the Terminal Tower complex opened, becoming the **second tallest building in the world**. (It remained the tallest U.S. building outside New

York City until 1964.)



The bachelor brothers had pyramided investments from steamship lines, Nickel Plate Railroad lines, trucking companies, coal mines, trolley lines and a peach orchard into a vast enterprise. In addition to the Terminal Tower, they owned all or part of Halle's Department Stores and the Greenbriar Resort in West Virginia. Their continuous overreach hit its zenith in 1929-1930. Almost all their investments were near bankruptcy, including their biggest venture of creating a [single interurban/trolley car & transcontinental railroad](#) that would be centralized in the lower basement of their Terminal Tower. Needing a \$40-million infusion of cash to save it all, the brothers' friend [George Tomlinson](#) (lake shipping) introduced them to his acquaintance [George A. Ball](#), a major customer of the Nickel Plate and head of the [Ball Brothers](#) glass company.

Like the O.P. and M.J., the 73-year-old businessman was no fan of the eastern bankers to whom the Vans were indebted. However, it was too late. When the stock market crashed in Sept. 1929 and the **Great Depression** took hold, the Van Sweringens' complicated stock and debt structure collapsed. With another investor, George Ball bought the entire empire

at auction for \$3.1 million.

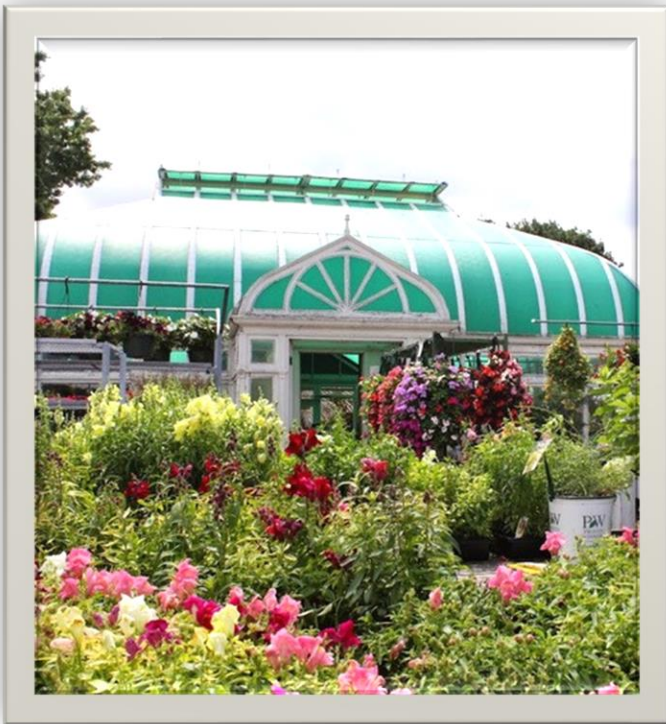
The Vans were promised they could buy it back when they recovered financially.

It would never happen. Within little more than a year, the plan ended suddenly when the brothers, both in their fifties, died of heart ailments. George, at age 74, never expected to outlive the two men he was trying to help. He had little time to manage these extensive Cleveland holdings, his family holdings and to deal with the 1936 Interstate Commerce Committee investigation on America's railroad operations. The Van Sweringens' vast business interests were purchased by Wall Street speculator Robert R. Young and Woolworth fortune heir Allan P. Kirby.

By 1937, George Ball left his estate near [Gordon Park](#) to return to Muncie, and sold his Northeast Ohio interests despite controversies

that were not fully resolved until the 1940s. The famous ornamental greenhouses on the Ball property were lost to time, save one, thanks to [Joseph Havel](#), whose family still runs the floral business today. Now you know the whole story.

*"I felt that anyone to whom such a situation was presented had a moral duty to try to do something to be of what help he could." - George A. Ball*



**Submitted by Dan Maxson** Local Lore by Max, 2010-2016 - The News-Herald; Community Media Lab Volunteer Trustee; Curator - FHHS / Fairport Harbor Lighthouse & Marine Museum; Volunteer Curator / Docent - Old Stone School, Concord Township. Additional research by [Virginia Jeschelnic](#).

*Photo credits: Cleveland Memory Project, Indiana Historical Society, Havel's Flowers & Greenhouse.*