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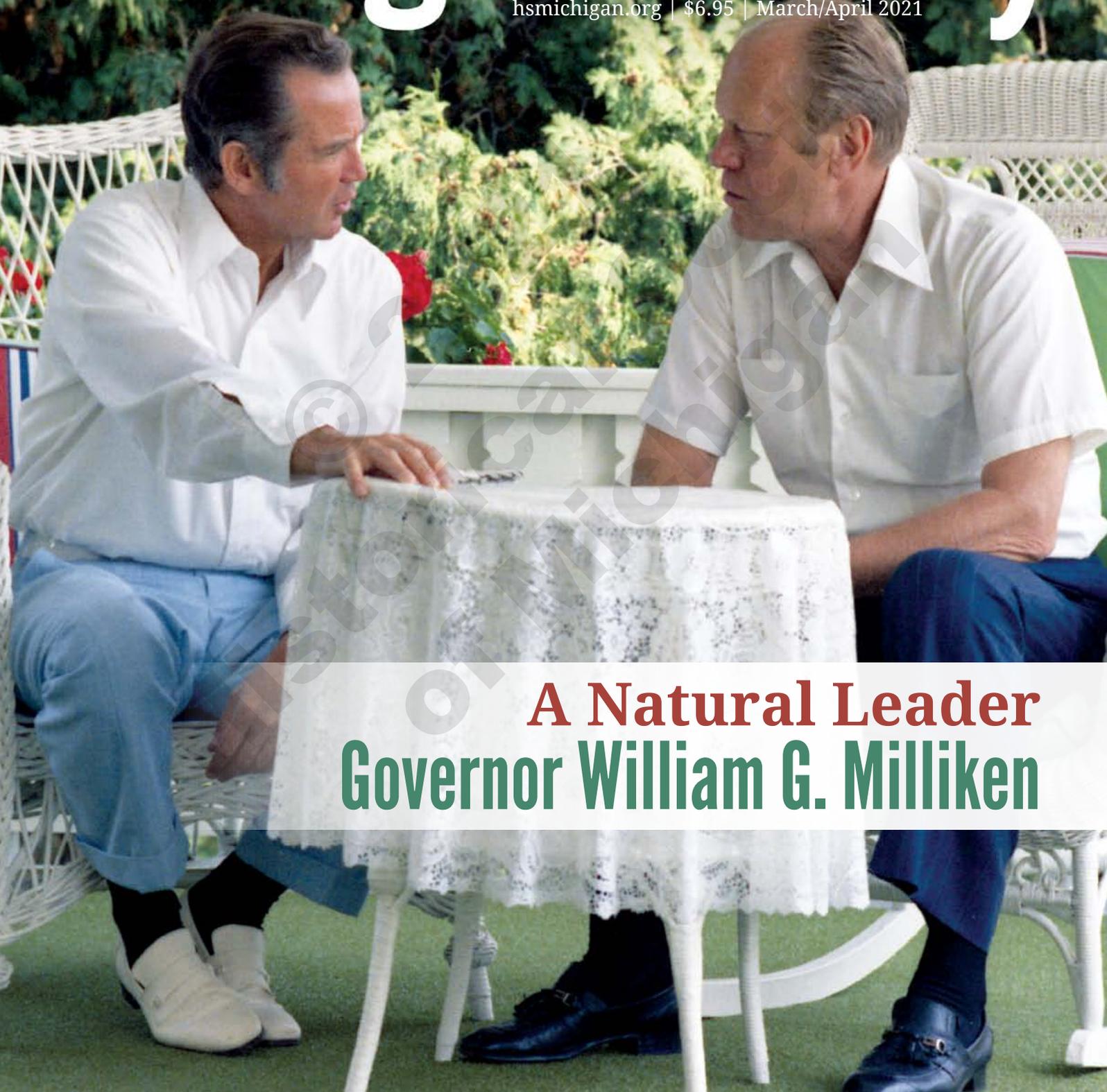
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A Natural Leader
Governor William G. Milliken

A “NEAR” Thing

NATIONAL
EMERGENCY
ALARM
REPEATER
SYSTEM

Charlotte’s Nuclear Testing Device

From nuclear fallout shelters to duck-and-cover drills, Americans in the Cold War Era developed many tools and tactics preparing for the possibility of nuclear war. The NEAR device—standing for National Emergency Alarm Repeater system—can be counted among those tools. It promised something that many Americans desperately wanted when it came to radioactive threats: a warning.

In 1950, President Harry Truman created the Federal Civil Defense Administration (FCDA) for the purpose of educating Americans on the threat of nuclear war. The agency initiated a program for public safety in 1956—looking to test a new alarm system that would provide Americans with advance warning of an imminent nuclear attack. Five U.S. manufacturers were given alarm devices, including Michigan’s own Midwest Research Institute and Office of Civil Defense. The manufacturers were tasked with composing tests for the devices, and once finalized, the

The NEAR device currently housed in the Courthouse Square Museum in Charlotte. (All photos courtesy of the Courthouse Square Museum.)



manufacturers looked for a small town in which to perform the final experiment. Charlotte, Michigan, was chosen.

The test was relatively simple, if involved, for Charlotte’s residents. On September 15, 1960, approximately 1,500 businesses and homes received NEAR devices for installation. The small black box plugged into a standard wall outlet and measured two to three inches across. When activated, it would buzz loudly to alert nearby individuals.

The actual demonstration occurred on October 11, 1960. On that day, Charlotte High School seniors passed around weather balloons to the test sites’ individuals, which would be released when each site’s device sounded the alarm. For the town of Charlotte, it was a major event—political leaders and manufacturing experts traveled to Michigan from across the United States and Canada to witness the test.

While the result was successful, the NEAR device was never widely used by Americans. With the introduction of the Emergency Broadcast System, the NEAR device faded in relevance as the new system proved more efficient in mass-awareness campaigns. NEAR was deemed obsolete, and many of the manufacturers and individuals destroyed the devices or returned them to the government.

However, not all devices were destroyed or removed from Michigan. Given the widespread



Top: The cover of the National Emergency Alarm Repeater (NEAR) device instructional booklet produced by AC Spark Plug; The Electronics Division of General Motors under the direction of the Office of Civil Defense Mobilization. Above: The Courthouse Square Museum in Charlotte, Michigan.

distribution of the NEAR device to Charlotte residents, it is no surprise that one of the devices made its way into the collections of the Courthouse Square Museum.

The museum, located in an 1885 courthouse in downtown Charlotte, is overseen by the Courthouse Square Association, which also preserves and maintains the Eaton County Courthouse, built in 1845 and located in Bennett Park, and the sheriff’s residence, constructed in 1873. Those buildings offer a unique combination of museum, research center, private office spaces, and community center providing rentable indoor and outside event spaces. With grand staircases made of solid walnut and a stained-glass ceiling, the 1885 courthouse is one of Eaton County’s historic gems.

For more information about the buildings, visit csamuseum.net or call (517) 543-6999. 🐾