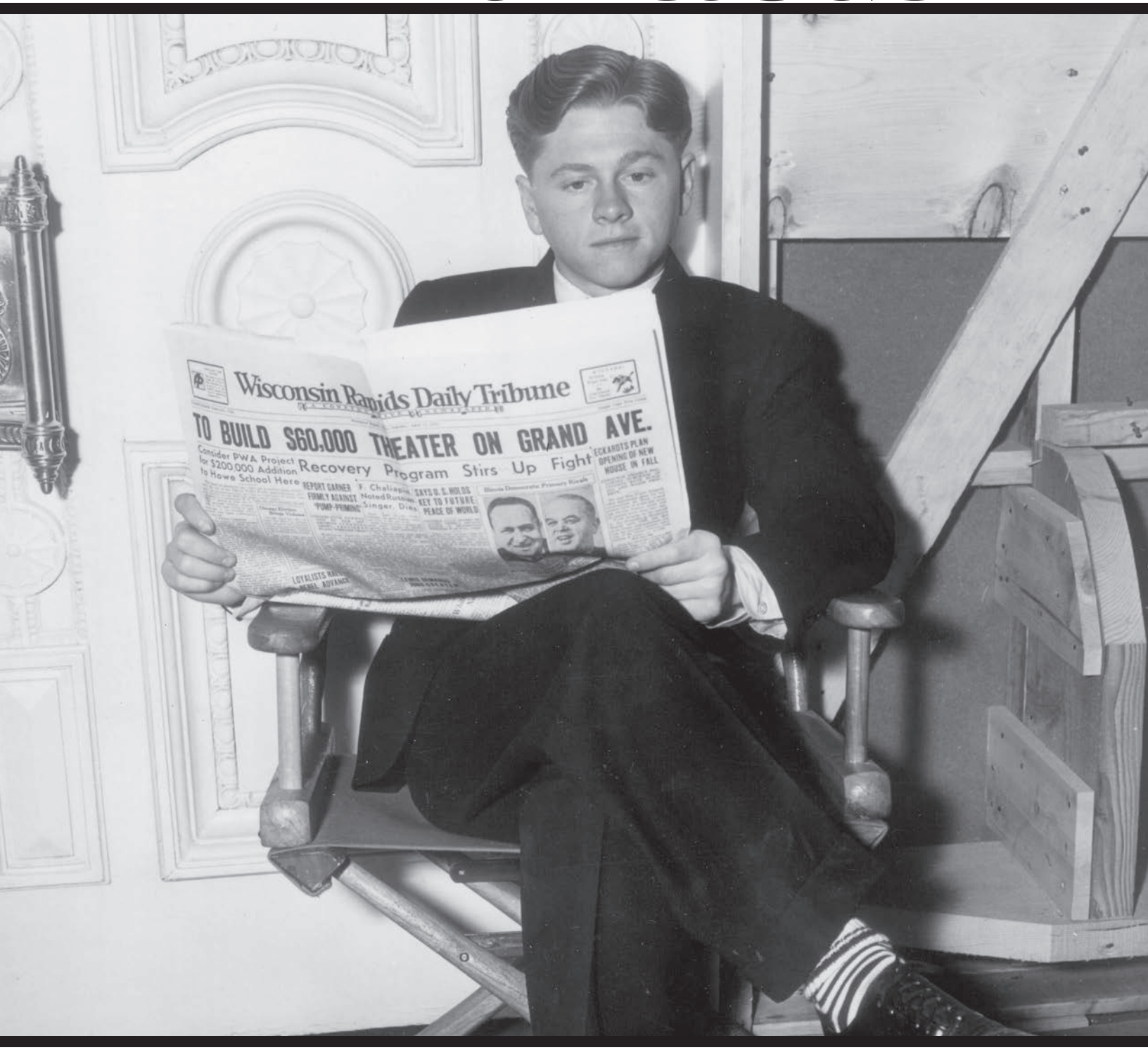
November 2007
Volume II #15

Artifacts



Cover: Actor Mickey Rooney reading about the opening of the Wisconsin Theater. Inside: “Year of the Digital History Center,” by Phil Brown, 3; “Rescue at Nepco Lake,” by Marjorie Hamm, 4-5; “My Friend Gilbert,” by Herbert Dittmann, 6-11; “Down on the Farm,” by Gerald Johnson, 12-14; Iron photos, 13-15; Grand Avenue photo, 16-17; “Wisconsin Theater,” by Paul Gross, 18-31; Uncle Dave, 32.

Museum: Classical Simplicity *(Photo by Uncle Dave)*

Year of the Museum

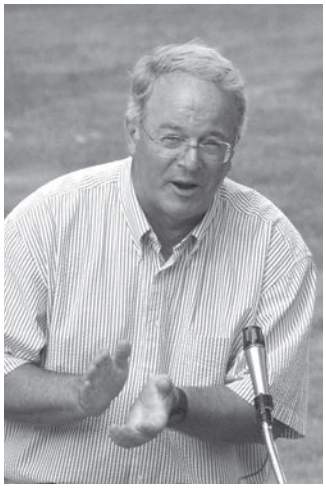
By Phil Brown, President

Looking ahead to 2008, the Year of the Digital History Center

Because I have a dream, historian Dave Engel likes to call me the "Rev. Martin Luther King of digital history." So it was not surprising that our vision of digital history was a big part of the SWCHC Annual Meeting, Sept. 24, 2007, at the Museum.

As the idea gets closer to reality, "Digital History" has grown to, "Digital History Center" and that is what we are in the process of creating at 540 Third Street South, Wisconsin Rapids.

The Museum, cared for by our administrator, Karen Pecher, and through various committees, has its specialties such as displays, events, staff, finances and building and grounds. Within the Museum building, occupying the former gift shop, is the new History Center, which is a little different as it gathers, preserves, and disseminates "history," primarily in the form of photographs and documents. To accomplish this in 2008 is to use digital technology.



The publication you hold in your hands is good old-fashioned "hard copy" but couldn't be produced without digital camera, computer, scanner and personal printer in the History Center and a laser printer and binder at The Print Shop. Digitally-coded addresses applied by ODC zip the issue to Wausau via digital USPS robots, allowing *Artifacts* to be hand-delivered to your mailbox by a real human being.

Essential to my personal digital dream was getting the Rev. Uncle Dave on board and he has graciously stepped up the gangplang, agreeing to conduct the History Center for at least three years. (His contract calls for a lifetime supply of cranberries. Anyone know a cranberry grower?)

The upgrade to History Center will take more than berries. We anticipate expenses of $25,000 in equipment and supplies. And, digitizing is a hands-on operation for which additional staff is required.

Perhaps the highlight of the Year of the Museum was the naming of the J. Marshall Buehler Gallery in the former Witter dining room. Other successful occasions were the Cranberry Festival Ice Cream Social, Garden Walk, 100-Year Birthday Party and Grand Affair. Over 1900 Museum visitors were greeted by a special display devoted to Witter house and T.B. Scott Public Library history. Attendance was more than double last year's figure, an increase attributed to the events above.

Distinguished guests for recent private tours included Paul Miller, Ruth Barker and Ellsworth Brown, head of the Wisconsin Historical Society. For Dr. Brown's appearance at Rotary Club, I was privileged to host the "Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin" of local history: Marshall Buehler, Paul Gross and, the former oldest young man, Uncle Dave.

Note that SWCHC received significant payment for hail damage and will have a local company replace the roofing. An electrical upgrade of the building is also proceeding.

In 2008, SWCHC will join Lester, Smart, Treml & Arendt to sponsor the next Paul Gross picture postcard video. At the Museum, a new display, supported by Mead-Witter foundation, will feature the work of former Tribune photographer, Don Krohn.

SWCHC Officers for 2008: Phil Brown, President; J. Marshall Buehler, Vice President; Nick Brazeau, treasurer; Joan Haasl, secretary. Also board members: Page Casey Clark, Francis J. Daly, Robert Detlefsen, Dave Engel, Barry Jens, Sarah Sigler, Bob Zimmerman.

Museum administrator: Karen Pecher, 423-1580 or museum@swch-museum.com.

History Center Director and *Artifacts* editor: Dave Engel, 423-7496 (home) or, at the Museum, 423-1580 and dave@swch-museum.com.

Photo: President Phil at Ice Cream Social

Rescue at Nepco Lake

By Marjorie Hamm

As former residents of the Wisconsin Rapids area and neighboring communities return to visit family, friends and old homesteads, many memories replay events of bygone eras. This was the case with Earl Freeberg, now of Stigler, Okla.

When Earl visited his sister, Evelyn Freeberg Kuehl of Wisconsin Rapids, in the fall of 2003, he was 86 years old and totally blind but could picture in his mind the old business districts of the east and west sides of the Wisconsin River. He could also name the families who lived at the old homesteads on Highway 34 and Fifth Avenue, north of Wisconsin Rapids.

Earl also had haunting memories of a near-drowning rescue that he was involved in as a 22-year-old on July 4, 1939, at Nepco Lake. He asked Evelyn if she ever heard whether the "Romanski girl" he saved on that fateful day was still alive and if she had any ill effects from the near-drowning accident.

After Evelyn contacted me, determining that it was my father and two sisters involved in the accident of long ago, she brought her brother, Earl, to my home for a visit.

Ten years old in 1939, I also had memories of the frightening incident.

Early that very hot afternoon my father drove us to the East Side swimming pool. To our great disappointment, it was closed for repairs. After much teasing by us for a ride to Nepco Lake, my father drove my three sisters, my friend Betty Lou and myself to the east beach of Nepco.

Soon, Betty Lou and I were caring for my three-year-old sister, Mary Jean, in the shallow waters at the shoreline. Twelve-year old Jane was giving my sister, six-year old Betty, piggyback rides into deeper water when she stepped into a drop-off. Frightened when they were unable to get out of the deep waters, Betty clung tightly around Jane's neck.

Meanwhile, that day had begun for Earl at his parents' farm north of Wisconsin Rapids in the town of Rudolph, where he lived as one of seven children of John and Albertine Freeberg. On that extremely hot day, he was anxious to take his Harley Davidson motorcycle out to Nepco Lake to cool off. He invited his friends and neighbors, Walt and Joe Passineau, to help him with his chores at home so they could get an earlier start.

Later, after several hours of swimming in the cool lake waters, Earl was sitting on his motorcycle in his swimming trunks, about ready to head back to the farm when he saw a man, fully clothed, run into the water. The man desperately screamed for help but no one seemed to be going to assist him. "Help the two girls, they are under the water!"

Earl ran into the lake.

A nearby swimmer helped the man, who was my father, while another swimmer dove for the younger girl, my sister, Betty, and returned her to the shore.

Earl dove into the cold, deep water. He grabbed on to the second girl, my sister, Jane, but lost his grip. The water seemed to be eight to 10 feet deep.

Earl dove again, a second and a third time, but he kept losing his hold on the girl. He was starting to swallow water himself, but dove once more and grasped the girl's ankle. Then he was able to pull her unconscious body onto the beach, where two men took over to revive her with artificial respiration. Earl, coughing and spitting up water, was able to recover, and, since help was available, got on his cycle and headed home with his friends.

A report of the rescue was published in the Wisconsin Rapids *Daily Tribune* the next day. It mentioned the names of two of the men involved. An unidentified third man was also mentioned. Earl was that person. He went to my father's grocery store, the Rapids Market, and identified himself. He was thanked many times and told how grateful the family was for his brave and daring rescue.

When we reunited years later, I assured Earl that my sister, Jane, had no ill effects from the near-drowning. She married, had a family of five children and lived to be 72 years old.

Earl expressed his happiness that he had been there for the rescue and at just the right time.

In 1942, Earl had entered the United States Army, serving with the 5th Army infantry in Europe during World War II. A corporal, he was a dispatch rider on a motor cycle, delivering orders in code to units on the front lines.

When he was off his cycle one day, it was blown up by a shell. After that, he operated out of a jeep. Earl suffered nerve damage to his ears during the war and wears a hearing aid today.

When World War II ended, Earl had spent 497 days on the front lines, including two Christmases. He remembered seeing Winston Churchill going from one landing craft to another, showing the victory sign!

Following his return to the Wisconsin Rapids area, Earl and his wife, Crystal, decided to move to Stigler, Oklahoma. There he started a trucking business and also owned and operated "Freebergs' Drive-In and Filling Station." As their three daughters grew up and married, Crystal became ill. One month after celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary, she passed away due to complications of cancer.

Earl was so sad and depressed he spent most of his time working. His daughters suggested that he attend VFW meetings. It was at one of these meetings he met his second wife, Jane. His blindness began after his second marriage.

In spite of his handicaps, today he is able to whittle on wood and loves to phone people with cheerful messages, sometimes ending conversations with a song.

Editor's Note: The Freeberg farm in the town of Rudolph borders the "old Monson place" on which I live. Both have been the subject of research, including an interview with Albertine Freeberg back around 1978 when history was just a gleam in my eye and I was yet to become an uncle. *D.E.*

My Friend Gilbert

By Herbert Dittmann

When I started second grade at Lowell School in Wisconsin Rapids in 1937, it was the fifth school I attended in two years. This was in the height of the Great Depression and my Father, in an attempt to find employment suitable for raising a family of five, required searching out jobs that were acceptable or even available, regardless where it took him. So we wound up in Wisconsin Rapids, where he became the buying manager of the largest department store in central Wisconsin: Johnson Hills. Being the youngest in the family, I was oblivious to most of the hardship that this meant.

I was aware though of the stares I would and did get as the new kid in class. Most of my classmates were friendly enough as I got to know to them. Except one: Gilbert. He seemed indifferent, aloof.

When I questioned others about this, they said, "Don't you know, he's the richest kid in town! His old man owns Consolidated Water Power & Paper Co., the largest paper mill in Wisconsin, maybe in the world; nearly all our parents and the people in town work for him."

That explains it, I thought. He must think he's better than I am. *That's got to change.* I don't know why I was so cocky. I had no reason to be.

On the way home from school that day, I got into an argument with him, trying to pick a fight I guess. We came to an empty lot and started wrestling.

The night before, it had rained considerably, making the footing in the lot slippery. We tried to avoid it but soon we were wallowing in the mud, each of us messier than the other. I was confident that I could win because he was a little smaller but soon we both tired, slapped muddy hands and gave it up.

He said, "Where do you live?"

"On Ninth Avenue."

"Oh, I live right up the road from there," he said. "What will your mother say when you get home?"

"Oh, nothing. I'll just tell her I beat up the richest kid in town."

A few days later, we walked home together again. When we got to my house, Gilbert said, "Let's keep going. I'll show you where I live."

We continued for a block or two, where my street emptied into a long driveway. "This is it."

On the right was a red brick barn two or three stories high with a concrete parking area next to what I guessed was his house. Like the barn, the house was red brick. It was three stories high.

We walked around to the front which overlooked the Wisconsin River. He went to the door and rang the bell. It was answered by a little middle-aged lady wearing a little white apron around her middle.

She greeted us and held the door open.

We entered a two-story foyer with a curved staircase ascending to a landing and a balcony that circled the foyer with what I guessed were bedrooms leading off of it. I think I said something like, "Wow!" I asked, "Was that your mother who answered the door?"

"No, that was one of the maids."

He showed me the dining room with a table that would seat about 20 people, then on to the living room, library, and sun room overlooking a colorful flower garden. Moving back to the foyer, we came to another room with a couple of tables surrounded by cabinets and shelves.

"What's this?"

"Oh, that's the game room."

As I was about to leave, the front door opened and a rather tall, slim, elegant lady entered.

Gilbert said, "This is my mother."

"I'm glad to meet you Mrs. Mead," I said and almost curtsied.

As I turned to go, she said, "You'll have to come back soon. Gilbert's told me so much about you." I thought, "I'll bet."

Going out the front door, I couldn't help but notice the curved driveway leading down to the front stone gate. Alongside the driveway, nearly covered by shrubs, was a garden nearly the whole length of the drive. I went around to the back, the way we came and walked on home, not knowing that was to be my home away from home for several years to come.

Not long after the first visit, I was invited over for dinner, the evening meal. This meant, my mother told me, that I couldn't wear my grubbies. She located a fairly nice dress shirt handed down from one of my older brothers, along with a tie from somewhere, and I was all set. I walked the two blocks down the road, marched up to the front door and rang the bell.

It was promptly answered by the same maid who had answered before. She said I could wait in the library; that Gilbert would be down in a minute. I couldn't believe the number of books there. It was like a municipal library. No wonder Gilbert was the smartest kid in our class.

Soon Gilbert entered, along with his older brother by a few years and a younger sister by a few years. He introduced George and Mary. We then went into the dining room where Mr. and Mrs. Mead were seated. Mr. Mead stood and introduced himself and I shook his hand. He seemed pleasant.

When a maid (or was it the cook?), brought out the food, everyone bowed their heads in what I guessed was a silent prayer. I silently made the sign of the cross.

The food was wonderful.

Mr. and Mrs. Mead did all the talking, asking where we came from and how many brothers and sisters I had. Mr. Mead seemed to know where my father worked.

All the time, I was passing the food and helping myself to all that came my way. There were a few laughs; everyone seeming to enjoy themselves.

Afterward, we played a few games in the game room. Later, when I had thanked them and prepared to leave, Gilbert stopped me at the door and said his mother liked my manners and that I was very polite.

When I got home, I told my mother this. Her response was, "I never want to hear that you were anything else!"

From then on, Gilbert and I started doing things together. We started a model airplane club with several other friends in one of the rooms on the

second floor of his barn. There, at makeshift tables, we painstakingly cut out the parts of the plane from a preprinted sheet of balsa wood.

It was tricky because the balsa wood was so thin that a slip of the knife and the plane would have been ruined. We glued these pieces together and covered the finished plane with various colored tissue paper, then moistened the paper to get rid of the wrinkles.

The real test was to see if they would actually fly. We would wind up the propeller and the attached stretched rubber band and launch it from the upstairs windows. Most made it to the ground but the problem was that many were in no shape to fly again.

The next day we would start a new one, convinced that this time it would really fly. The airplane glue to put the parts together made us slightly giddy but we didn't sniff it, knowing the consequences.

We did some deviant things, though nothing serious.

We went to Gilbert's kitchen and, when the cook wasn't looking, took a paper cup and filled it with finely-ground coffee. Then we got paper drinking straws and went to the barn, where we tamped the coffee into the straws and twisted off the ends. We lit the end and smoked like the big boys.

We played, "Kick the can." We'd get all the kids in the neighborhood in the large parking area between the house and barn. An empty vegetable can was the home base.

When it was decided who would be "it," the rest of us would run and hide. He would stay "it" until he could find one of us and run back to the can and shout, "1-2-3 on Jimmy" or whomever. Then Jimmy was "it."

When "it" went looking for someone who was hiding, the can was left unguarded so anyone could come in, kick the can and yell, "Oly, oly otsen free." Meaning that everyone who was hiding could come out without fear of being "it." This went on for hours and was the source of a lot of fun and teasing.

Gilbert and I joined the Cub Scouts together and dressed up in our blue uniforms with yellow scarves. We were pretty proud.

Shortly after that, we would pack a lunch and go on long hikes in the woods with our friends. Several times, Gilbert's grandfather, Bert Williams (Mrs. Mead's father), joined us. He had a wealth of information about the out-of-doors, about rock formations, leaves of the different trees and some of the animals. I learned a lot.

The Meads were thrifty people. During the War, Mr. Mead rode a bike to the paper mill each day, saving gas and wear and tear on his tires. Gilbert's grandmother, Ruth Mead, had an electric car that she would drive around town. It was the strangest thing, to see this little old lady coming by in this two-seater car and not hearing a sound.

Three of us went bowling. This was about the time that Pepsi came out. Their jingle was "Twice as much for a nickel too, Pepsi Cola is the drink for you." Coca Cola had only a six ounce bottle then. Pepsi had a 12-ounce bottle. When Mrs. Mead picked us up after bowling, she bought us a Pepsi, and we got three straws.

We spent a lot of time in their game room playing Monopoly, a new game at that time. It seemed Gilbert always won. He'd get Boardwalk and Park Place and all the hotels and wipe us out.

He was a photographer. He didn't just shoot pictures. He developed them and made the prints. He had his own dark room in their basement.

He was an entrepreneur. One day, he called me and said, "Let's go sell some vegetables. I'll have the gardener pull some carrots, radishes and onions and we'll sell them house to house."

When I got to his house, he was loading the produce in his coaster wagon and icing it down. Off we went down the street and he would go up to doors and ask if they would like to buy some vegetables. When they said what they wanted, he would holler the order down to me. I'd wrap the purchase up and he'd collect the money and off we'd go to the next house, including mine.

I often wondered what the people thought, the richest kid in town peddling vegetables house to house.

He was a musician. I don't know if he took lessons, but he could play the piano and the accordion. That Christmas, Gilbert, Danny Main and I went caroling in the neighborhood.

Danny was a fairly tall, skinny kid who had a great soprano voice. I sang the melody, I guess, and Gilbert sang alto and accompanied us with his accordion. People seemed pleased with our efforts and many invited us in, took pictures and pushed cookies on us.

Sadly, Danny died a few years later with leukemia.

I felt sorry for him because he always wore s hort pants. In the winter, he would wear them with long tan stockings. His mother couldn't afford anything more.

The highlight of the season was Mead's annual Christmas party and dance. A lot of the kids in the neighborhood were invited, along with Gilbert's cousins who lived across the river. Cookies and punch were served and a musical combo was provided. After a series of dances we'd learned in gym class, such as the Virginia reel and others, we were given a dance card with numbers for the rest of the evening's dances.

We were expected to locate partners for each dance and fill out the card with their names. Being somewhat shy, I found it awkward to fill out my card. Sensing this, some of the girls came to my rescue. All in all, it was a fun time.

My parents sent me to a Catholic school for 6th grade. This was located across the river so I saw less of Gilbert. After 8th grade, his parents enrolled him in an eastern prep school, Hotchkiss, located in Connecticut. I received a letter from him telling me how he was adjusting to his new surroundings and that he was on a soccer team. I didn't hear from him after that.

I believe Gilbert went on to Yale University and graduated with a degree(s) in Nuclear Physics and went to work as a scientist for NASA in California. I ran into his dad a few times when I would return to Wisconsin Rapids. He told me that after 25 years with NASA, Gilbert and his wife moved to Washington D.C., where he went to law school.

On the Internet I found that Gilbert and his wife, Dr. Jaylee Mead, have been recognized among the leading philanthropists in the nation's capital.

It was only last year that I came across an obituary in the State Journal, listing a Robert Mead of Spring Green, Wis. Reading through it years before, I found that Robert was the son of Gilbert Mead of Washington D. C. and that his funeral would be held there the next day.

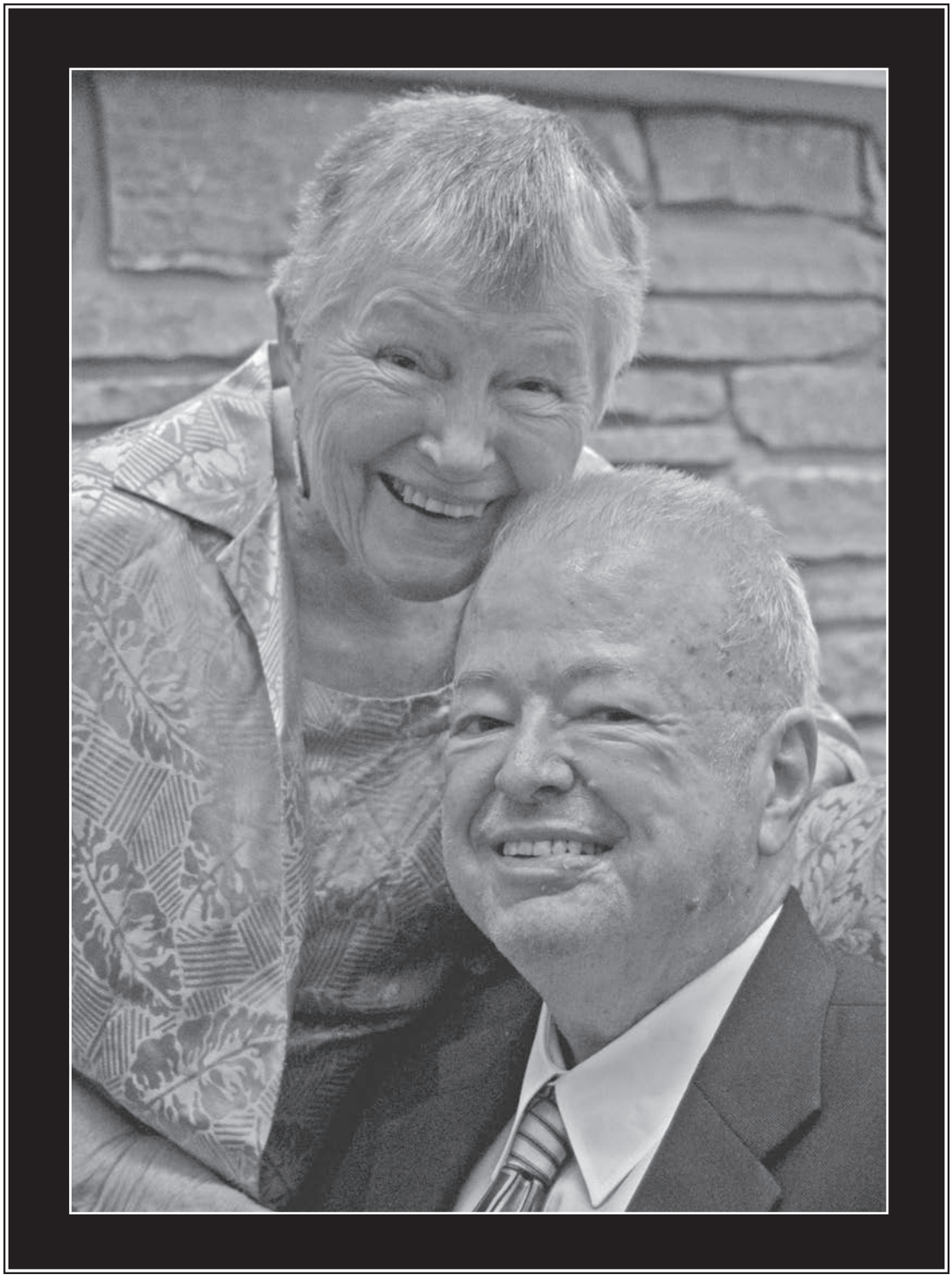
I drove out and found the church. A small group of people were gathered in front. I got out of my car and approached them, looking for Gilbert. I didn't see him but I did see his brother George. I offered my sympathy and asked if Gilbert was there.

He pointed to a group of men and there was Gilbert, the shortest of them in the middle. I waited patiently until they had finished their conversation and stepped in and introduced myself. Nearly 60 years had passed since we'd seen each other.

A big smile came on his face and he gave me a manly embrace. We chatted amiably for a few minutes then he asked me if I had seen Mary, his sister. We went over to where she was standing with her family. She couldn't believe it was me after all these years, wanting to know where I lived. When I told her, "Madison," she said, "So do I." I didn't get her married name.

We all chatted some more, remembering some of the old days, when people started to move into the church. At that point, I thought that this is inconsiderate of me, trying to make a reunion at their time of grief. I slowly moved out of the way, walked to my car and drove home.

Herb Dittman, who lived with his family in Wisconsin Rapids from 1936-1947, writes: *My dad was the buying manager for Johnson Hills Department Store. There were six in our family. Elaine, the oldest, married Joe Nimtz. My two older brothers, Phil and Bill were in the 32nd Division during WWII. Bill came back and went on to be a patent attorney for Continental Can. Phil was killed by a Japanese sniper in New Guinea. Our Irish mother was feisty but a member of the Catholic Daughters of America and Gold State Mothers. It was in October of my senior year at Lincoln High when we moved. My dad bought the West Bend Woolen Mills. After four years of Air Force service, I married a West Bend native, Dorothy Lang, then finished my degree work at UW-Madison. I am now a retired insurance executive with very fond memories of Wisconsin Rapids.*



Jaylee and Gilbert Mead *(Photo by Uncle Dave)*

Down on The Farm
1933-1938
By Gerald Johnson

How my parents' 59-year marriage ever survived the debacle of the five years on the "Boles Farm" is a family mystery. My older brother Dale related that my mother was devastated by my dad's quitting a good paper mill job in 1933, and losing our job-related housing.

From the comfortable two-family company house owned by the Nekoosa Edwards Paper Co., with indoor plumbing and electricity, our family moved to a farmhouse on rural Gaynor Avenue, a mile from the nearest paved road. We had no automobile.

The "Boles Farm" consisted of the 1900-era house, a couple of small sheds, a two-holer outhouse toilet, and a weather-beaten barn, which was perhaps the soundest building on the property.

We had no electricity, telephone, furnace or running water. Heating was by a wood-burning space heater and cooking done on a wood-burning iron cook stove. Drinking, cooking, wash and bath water was hand pumped from a stone-lined well located just outside the back door of the farmhouse. The drinking water was of excellent quality, a source of pride for my father. The long-handled iron hand pump worked well, bringing up a steady stream that filled our water pail in a dozen strokes.

This porcelain-coated water pail was kept on a wash stand that also held a porcelain wash basin and hand soap. Underneath the bottom of the wash stand was a slop pail into which hand and face wash water was poured after use. I do not remember if we had more than one water pail. We kept a metal drinking dipper in this water pail.

Summer or winter, warm water for hand washing and baths was heated on the huge iron kitchen stove which had no reservoir, as some newer wood stove models did. All hand and bath water was heated in stove-top tea kettles which held about a gallon each.

Brothers Roger and Dale, being older, were allowed to take sponge baths, but my early baths were in one of the wash tubs used by our family to wash clothes. A number of pans and kettles were set on the cook stove and used to heat my bath water. The wash tub was set near the kitchen stove for warmth, and warm water could be added when needed as the bath water cooled.

Washing and ironing were very time consuming. The dirty clothes were immersed in hot water in a galvanized wash tub on top of the cook stove. Fels-Naphtha brand soap was slivered off a big bar with a paring knife and splashed around with a wooden paddle to make suds. Mother called this "boiling" the clothes.

The clothing items were then agitated with the wooden paddle, and finally fished out with the paddle into a second tub, there to be hand rubbed on a galvanized washboard, a ribbed device mounted on a wooden frame. If not totally clean, clothes went back into the hot soapy water.

The third wash tub was the first rinse and the fourth tub the final rinse. The rinse water was not as hot as the soapy water, not being kept over the fire. After the final rinse, the clothes were wrung out by hand and in the summer hung out on the wash lines to dry. Just how the drying was handled in winter on the farm has been forgotten.

Ironing was also a huge job. The "sad" irons used were oval-shaped solid iron devices weighing several pounds each and were heated on the kitchen stovetop. A snap-on locking device in a wooden handle made it possible to eject the iron base that had begun to cool during the ironing. The next hot iron was picked up off the stovetop using the snap-on handle, to continue with the smoothing. Mother used four sadiron units in her work, one in use, and the other three in stages of reheating.

The wool and cotton garments of that time had to be dampened before ironing, or sprinkled, as it was called. The clothing items were first sprinkled with water, and then rolled up and placed near the ironing board to await smoothing.

Our iron cookstove was a wood burner. Dad used his best split-and-dried hardwood to make the fires hot. The big kitchen stove had several lids, much like the burners on gas and electric stoves of today, that could be raised to expose cookware to the open flame. These were about eight inches round, with a small notch in each to allow a lifter to be inserted to raise the lids. When a proper bed of coals had been created, this stove became a very hot cooking device.

The large oven on our cookstove was surrounded by the fire pit on two sides. Mother baked bread among other things in this oven, and careful as she was, sometimes the bread crusts became burned and hard, and had to be cut off.

Our big wooden kitchen table and wash stands were covered with colorful oilcloth, which could be easily wiped clean.

Since we had no electricity, we had no refrigerator, and with no rural ice delivery route, had no ice box. We used a cool fruit cellar and cold well water to preserve perishable foods in warm weather.

Our farm house was heated with a single large pot-bellied space heater. This was a wood burner that used "chunks," which were large hardwood log segments. Coal was expensive and used sparingly to augment the wood during the very cold months of the year.

From Museum collection, sadiron similar to above description

In the large dark living room during below-zero weather, the pot bellied stove often glowed red hot and radiated heat that was painful if you drew to close to the stove. The wall near the stove was protected by a four-foot-square metal asbestos-backed shield. The floor under the stove had the same type of metal-faced pad protection from the heat.

The three Johnson boys slept upstairs. The only heat in this bedroom was from a register in the ceiling above the living room stove that opened into that large unpartitioned upstairs room, plus whatever heat that migrated up the stairs.

We would always hear Dad get up early and "shake up" the pot belly stove, throwing in a couple chunks and noisily stoking up the kitchen stove as well.

We used several types of kerosene lamps for lighting the large gloomy rooms of the farm house.

Relating to farming on the Boles place (as my Dad called it), there was none. It was a pseudo farm. We had a large garden, some chickens and a cow or two, and boarded horses and mules from other owners. We grew no crops. It was my dad's dream, and my mother's nightmare.

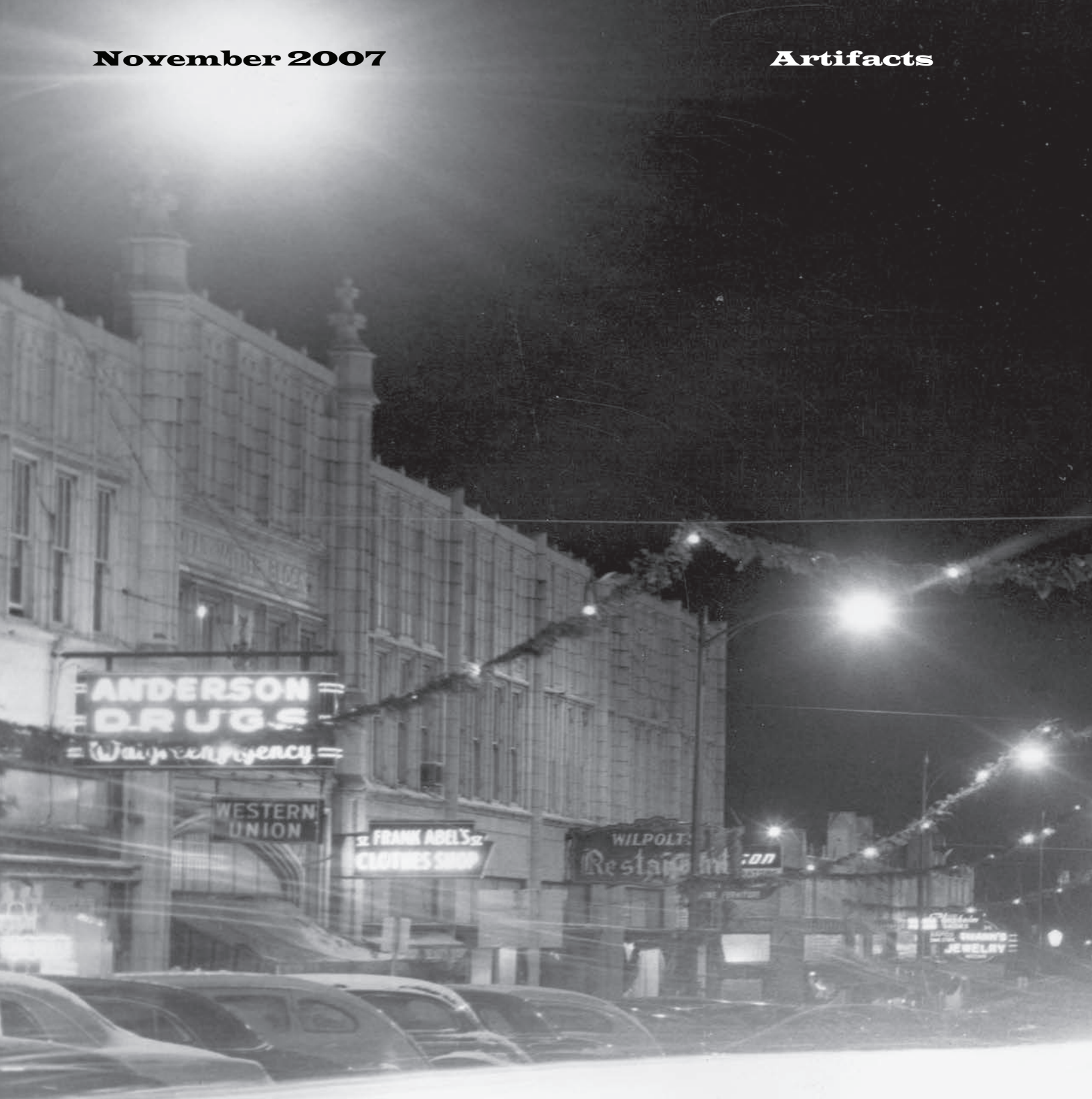
As for five-year-old Gene and his brothers, we walked a mile to the bus stop at Sisco's Grocery, where Mother and Dad had a shaky line of credit, and rode the Tri-City Bus Line using school tickets that were provided by the Wisconsin Rapids school system.

Most of my clothing was passed down to me from my older brothers, and family friends and relatives, often threadbare and mended, but always neat and clean. Our dad resoled and re-heeled our worn out shoes, using a shoe "last" and shoemaker's tools. Shoe heels and soles could be purchased at any hardware store at this time. We still have the old shoemaker tools in our attic, a remembrance of the old days on the Boles farm.

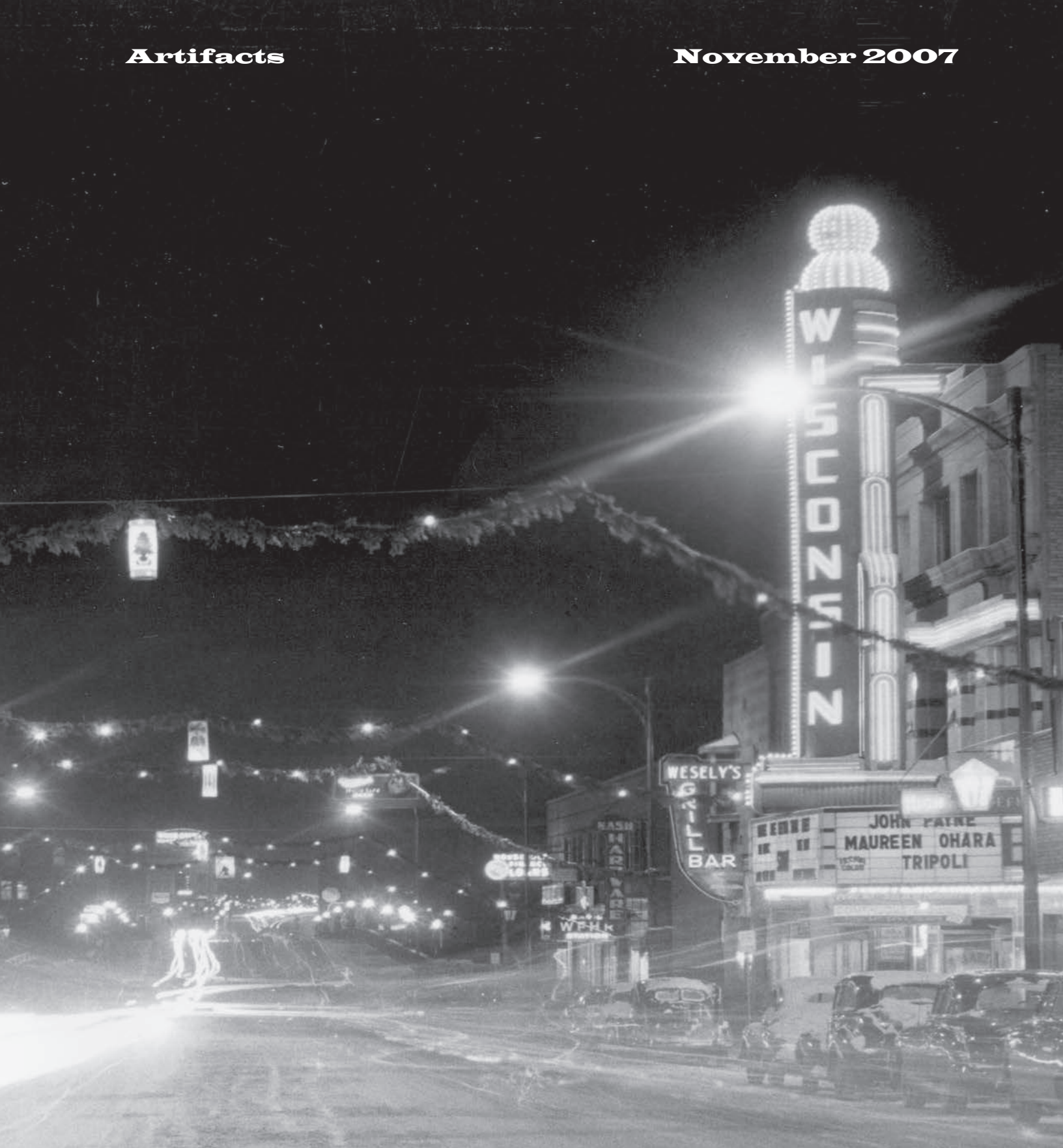
When oldest brother Roger went off to the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp, and big brother Dale to Grandpa VanderPloeg's farm in Arpin, my only playmates were my imagination and our several barn cats.

Alone at night in the large dark upstairs, I often would count each train whistle, which marked the early night hours. Brother Dale had taught me how to identify the whistle sounds of the four different rail lines. In retrospect, I believe the terrifying nightmares of my early teens through mid twenties had their birth in the coal black lonely darkness of the bedroom of the "Boles Farm."

Above, typical sadiron. Facing page, fuel-heated irons



Grand Avenue Looking East c. 1950 (*Don Krohn photo*)



Now showing: "Tripoli" (1950)

Big Night on Grand

The debut of the Wisconsin Theatre in the center of downtown Wisconsin Rapids signaled a new era with the 1939 "Honolulu." *Hundreds of lovely hula girls . . . scores of lilting songs . . . spectacle to make you marvel! Movie star Brooks Mason tries to avoid his fans and spend some weeks on vacation...*

(Photos contributed by Paul Gross)


WISCONSIN
GRAND OPENING
WEDNESDAY FEB 1ST
ELEANOR POWELL BURNS AND ALLEN
HONOLULU

This was

the Wisconsin.

Luxury, art deco and good housekeeping combined to make an evening at the Wisconsin a sophisticated pleasure.

This Was the Wisconsin

The Wisconsin Theatre Story

By Paul Gross

The birth of "The Wisconsin" was announced by a front page April 12, 1938, *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune*. Mr. and Mrs. Frank Eckardt had purchased the former Citizens bank building on West Grand Avenue and planned to build a beautiful new movie theater on the site. At the time, the Eckardts operated two local theaters, the Rapids (now Roger's Cinema) on the east side and the Palace (now the Central Wisconsin Cultural Center) on the west side. Before the age of television, the prospect of a fine new movie theater created a great deal of excitement in the community.

As a first phase of the project, Frank and Henrietta took an extensive trip around the Midwest, inspecting theaters for the latest innovations in equipment, design, and patron-friendly accommodations.

Progress was not long in coming. A well-known local architect, Donn Hougen, was hired to design the new theater, making full use of the existing building for the lobby and foyer area plus a whole new section for the 900-seat auditorium, which was positioned east and west. The stage end was located at Second Avenue, which actually made the complex an "L" shaped building. The theater entrance required a little over two thirds of the available width of the bank building, the remainder of which was leased to Mr. & Mrs. Bob Kerrin for their candy store, soda fountain and Karmel Korn franchise. However, to avoid any mess or sticky seats, no popcorn or candy bars were allowed in the Eckardt theaters.

The complex was built under a general contract with the M. E. Greenberg Company of Minneapolis, a firm that specialized in theater construction, auditorium, stage and booth installation and overall design. The beautiful marquee, sign, attraction boards and stage lights were the product of the Vent & Canopy Company, Minneapolis. A plush upstairs lounge was fitted with comfortable sofas and chairs that complemented the art-deco design. Rest rooms were also a part of the upstairs area. But perhaps most unique was the Cry Room where parents with small children could sit in comfort and enjoy the movies from behind a large plate glass window that overlooked the auditorium. During late shows it was not unusual to find young couples using the Cry Room for a little romance when it was not patrolled by one of the uniformed ushers.

In the projection booth two beautiful state-of-the-art Simplex E-7 projectors, equipped with dual shutters, projected a beautiful sharp picture to the large auditorium screen. Light source for the projectors was a pair of Peerless Magna Arc carbon arcs fed by a DC motor generator located in the basement of the theater. The dual sound system was also by Simplex, being dual so that if a tube or some other component failed in the sound system, the second amplifier could be switched on without interruption of the movie.

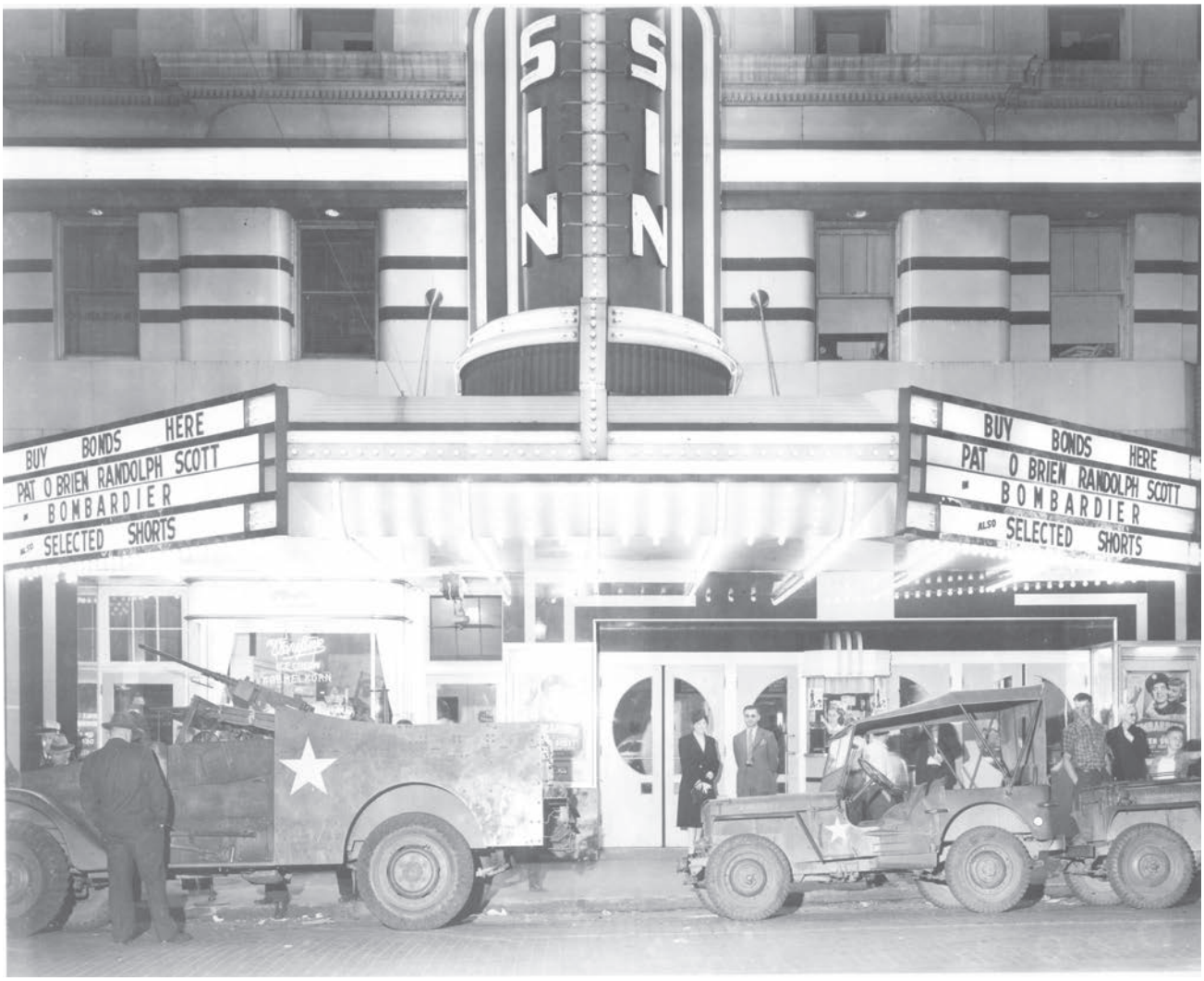
The big night came on Wednesday, Feb. 1, 1939, when the beautiful new Wisconsin Theater opened to sellout crowds. The first movie to run was "Honolulu," starring Eleanor Powell, George Burns and Gracie Allen. After waiting in the sidewalk crowds that cold February evening, it all was worth it as patrons stared in disbelief as smartly uniformed ushers directed them to their seats.

Each received a fifty page souvenir program, detailing the theater's accommodations and congratulatory messages from civic leaders and suppliers. Indeed, the Eckardts had every right to be proud; nothing had been spared. Later, the theater was written up in the June 24, 1939, issue of the *Motion Picture Herald*, pictures and all. Screen actor Mickey Rooney even had his picture taken reading a Rapids *Daily Tribune* article on the theater.

Thanks for Everything (1938). Adolph Menjou, Jack Oakie, Jack Haley and Arleen Whelan. Haley, a hapless "average American," is exploited by the advertising industry. The newsreel, "March of Time," was available from 1935-1951.

Opposite: Top: Showing during WWII bond drive, Bombardier (1942). Below, left: names on the WWII Honor Roll, back wall, are Richard Krueger, Wm. Zabawa, Joe Flanagan, Wm. Flanagan, Robert Kubisiak, Ralph Robinson, Robert McCain, Edward Kaja, James Prebbanow, James Hanneman, Richard Minta, Ellsworth Primeau, Wm. Hanneman, Robert Ebsen, Paul Gross, Thomas Cartier, Richard Galganski, Robert Robinson, Roger Gaulke, Michael Stewart. Robert Bodette, Herbert Graefe.

Below right, another Honor Roll, "Serving Our Country" with additional names.


SIN
SIN
BUY BONDS HERE
PAT O BRIEN RANDOLPH SCOTT
BOMBARDIER
ALSO SELECTED SHORTS
BUY BONDS HERE
PAT O BRIEN RANDOLPH SCOTT
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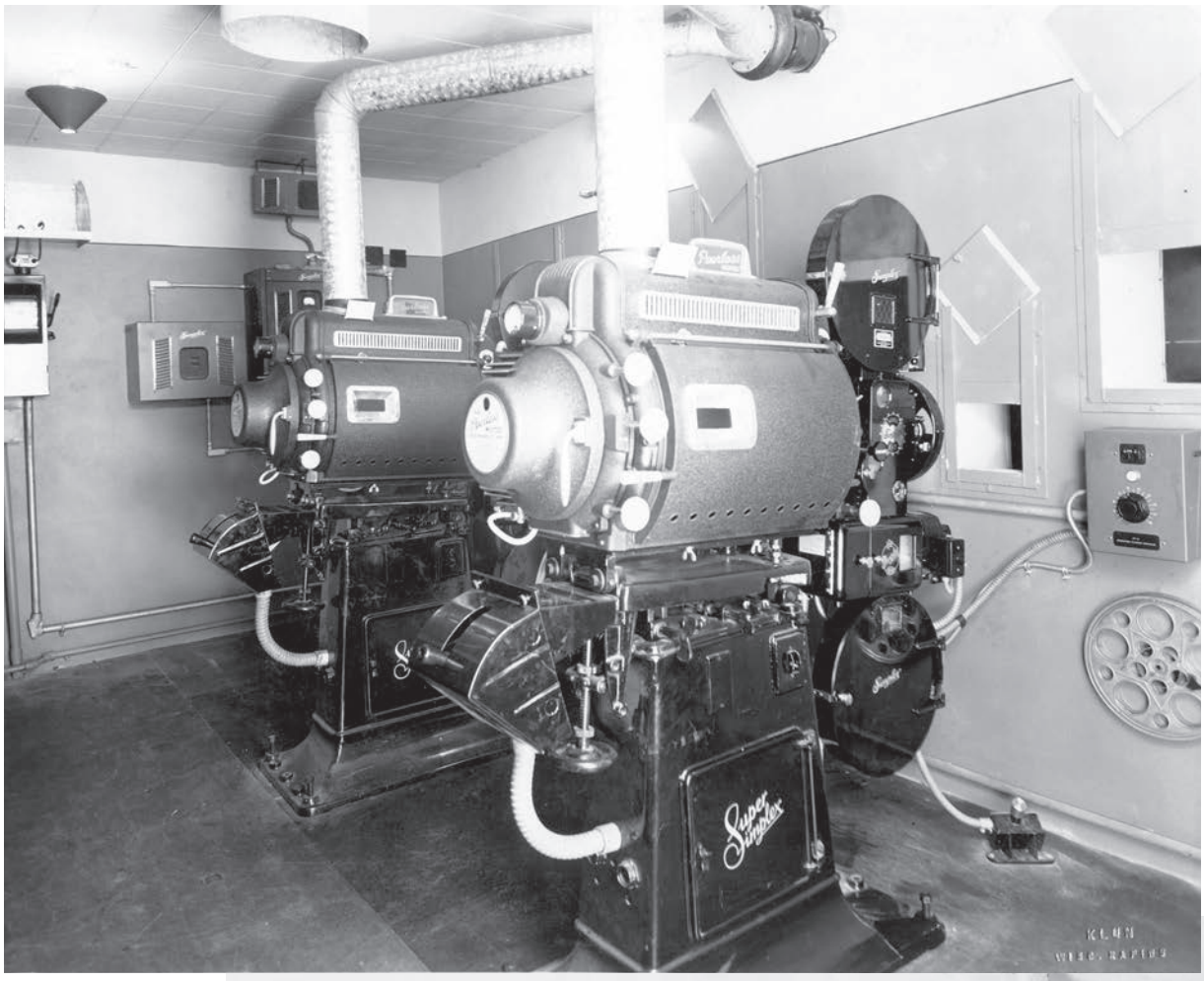
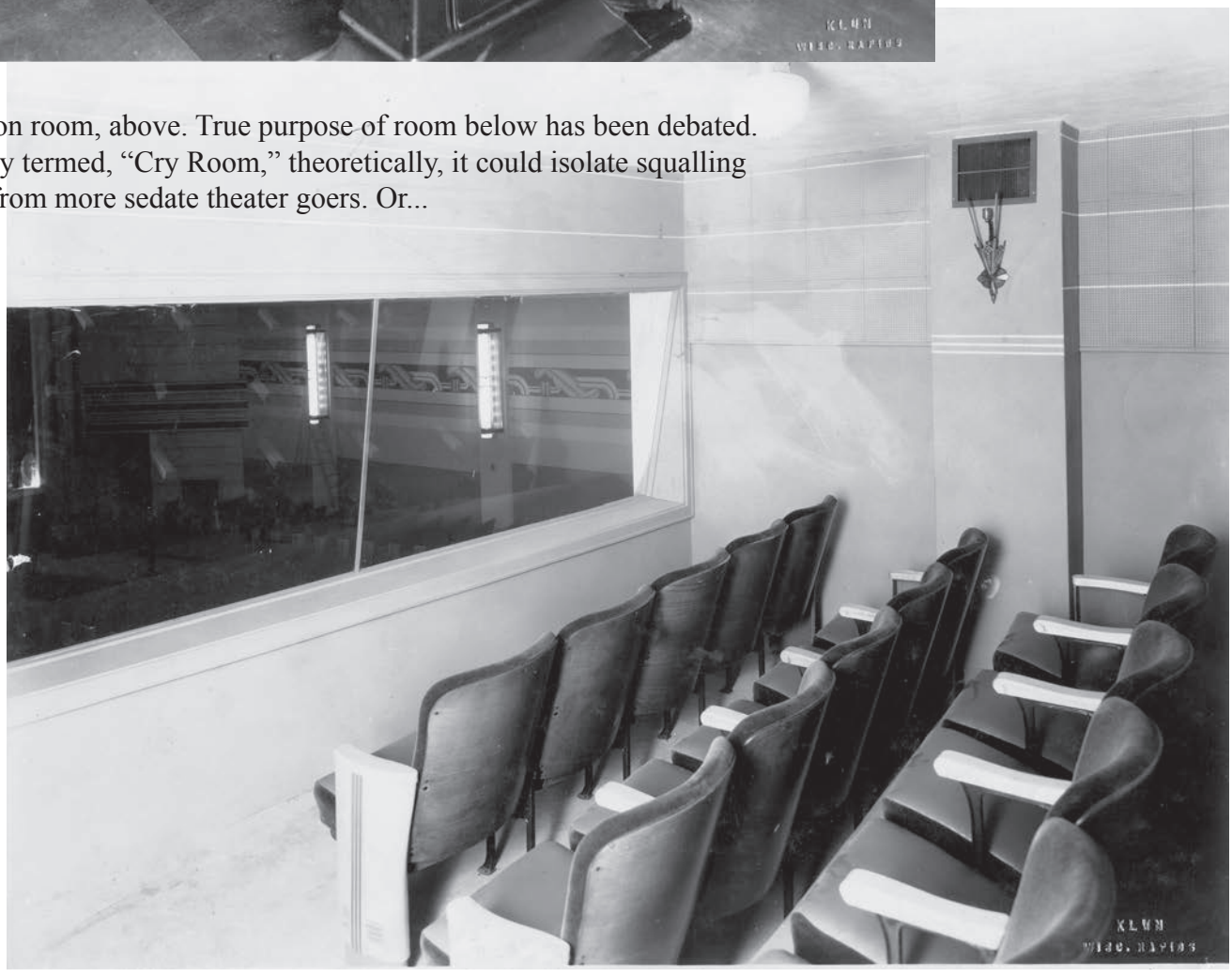
ALSO SELECTED SHORTS

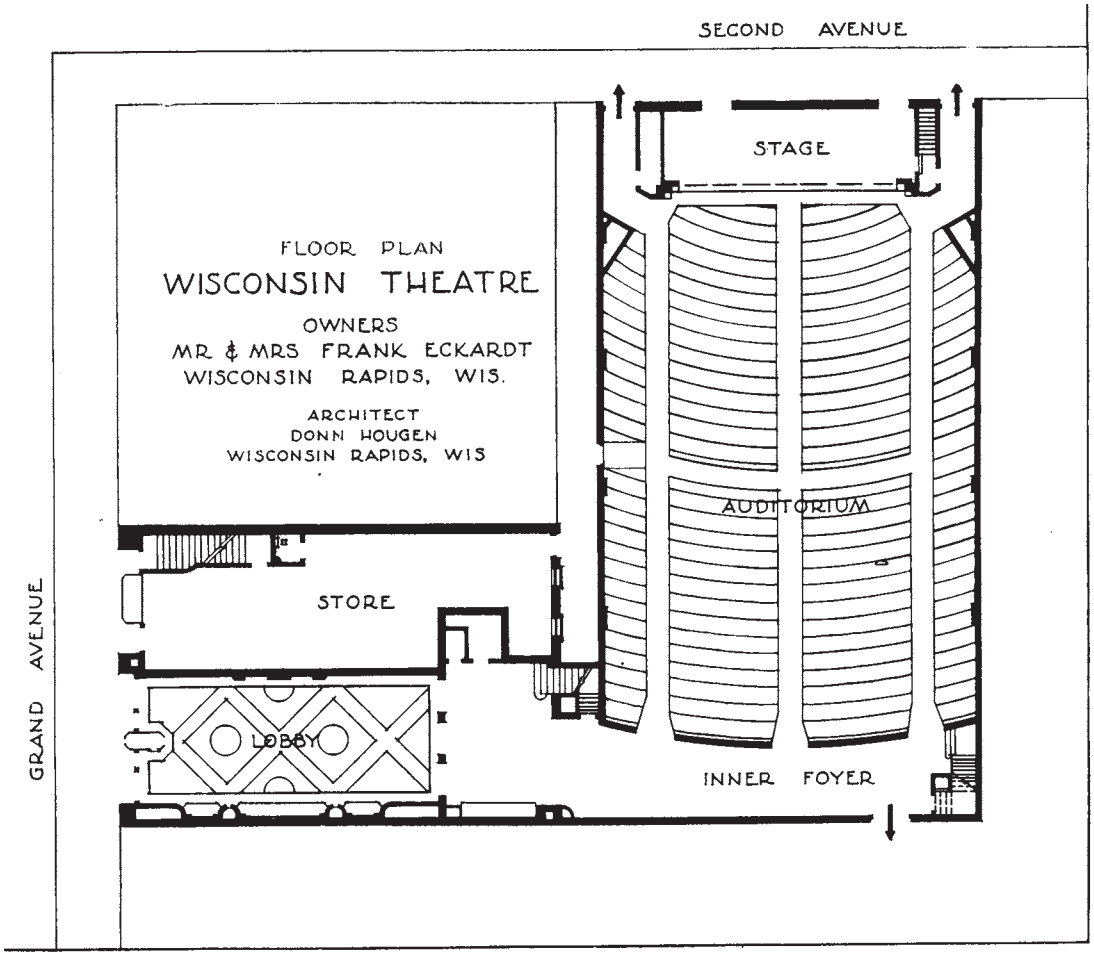

Attack
WITH
WAR
BONDS
HONOR ROLL


SERVING OUR COUNTRY
BUY A BOND TODAY



Projection room, above. True purpose of room below has been debated. Officially termed, "Cry Room," theoretically, it could isolate squalling infants from more sedate theater goers. Or...





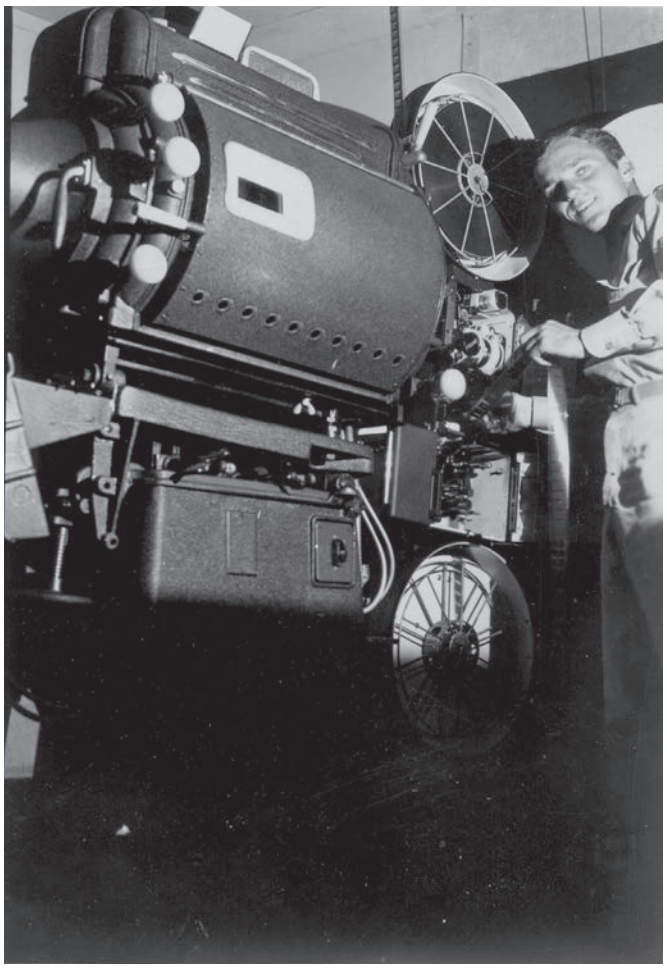
The addition that was the theater dwarfed the lobby section, which had been Citizens National Bank. Of the three theaters, the Wisconsin was the most elegant.

Because of the L-shape, many movie watchers had no idea which way they were facing until they exited onto Second Avenue.

Now permit me to fast forward to the fall of 1940.

I was a senior in high school and working at my first job under Social Security, selling shoes at Johnson Hills department store after school and on Saturdays. My bosses were Oscar Adler, and everyone's boss at J&H, Praxida Golla. My pay was 21 1/2 cents an hour. I hated that job.

Then one Saturday morning, a miracle happened. In walked Ron Desper and Mike Stewart. Both were projectionists at the Wisconsin Theatre. They sat down as if they wanted me to show them some shoes. Instead, they asked me if I would be interested in working with them in the theaters as a projectionist. The pay would be 40 cents an hour.



I felt like the luckiest guy on Earth. Bye bye Johnson Hills, hello, Mrs. Eckardt.

My pals, "Robbie" Robinson, "Red" Pavloski and Rich Galganski were already working as ushers at the Wisconsin. I envied them and now here I was going to be doing even better. Wow!

That same Saturday night, I was in the booth at the Wisconsin at 6:30, soaking up instructions like a sponge. When we parted the curtains and that picture hit the screen at 7 p.m., I was ecstatic. I couldn't believe I was actually getting paid to do something I loved so much. From then on, it just got better. I also worked at the Rapids and Palace theaters and besides my regular pay, each week, got two passes for my folks or girlfriends.

Those passes got me in trouble. One particular night, I was only supposed to work for the first show at the Wisconsin and then I'd be off at nine.

So I made a date with a girl. She was to come to the first show, and, when it was over, wait for me in the lobby and we'd go out. Like most of the guys in high school, I didn't have a car so we would walk a girl home after a stop at Wilpolt's or the Sugar Bowl.

Well, somehow I forgot about getting off early and made another date with another girl to come to the second show, after which we'd go out. The second girl was Jane Camps, now my wife.

When I walked into work that evening, I mentioned to Mike Stewart that I had a date after the second show. Mike promptly reminded me that I only had to work the first show. Ron was coming in at nine.

It was then that I remembered the first date. Solution—at 9 o'clock Mike went down in the lobby to make sure Jane was in the theater and soon Ron showed up and I went down and got out of there with my first date. With some excuses I managed to get her home early enough so I could get back to the Wisconsin and show up for date number two.

I didn't see much of Frank Eckardt. I was only at the theater about a week when he and Henrietta parted company after Henrietta caught Frank "making out"

after hours in the upstairs lounge with the ticket seller, and believe me, he was gone just like that.

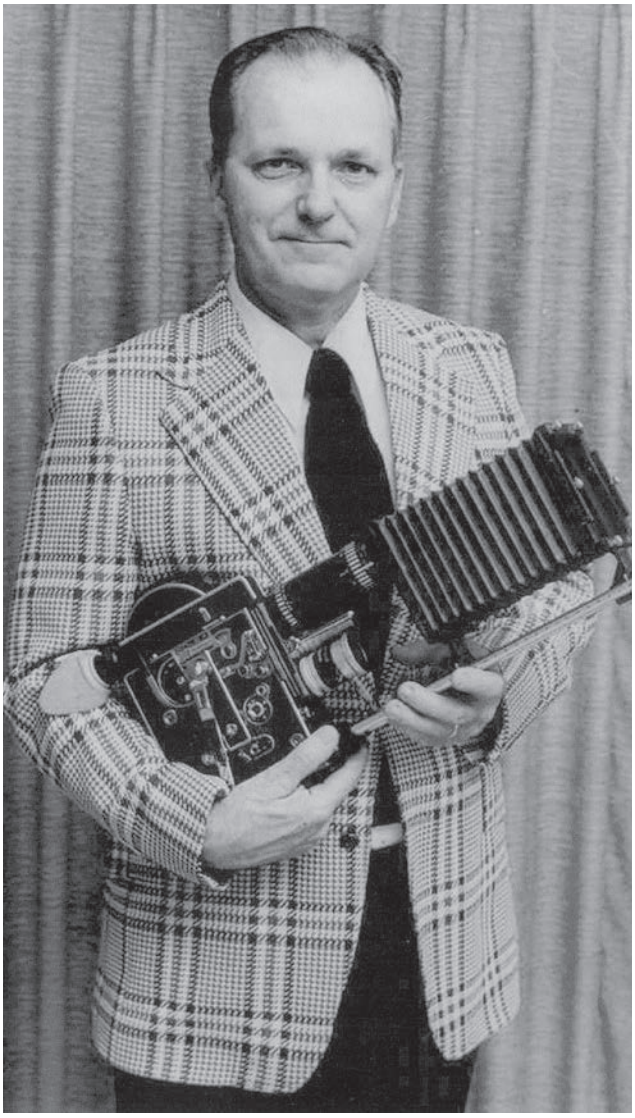
Mrs. Eckardt was always very nice to me. She was a perfectionist, however. She often sat in the theater to make sure we operated the lights and curtains correctly. Also, the music before the show must be correct. How could it be otherwise? We had one 12-inch symphonic red seal Victor record that was always played: "Vienna Blood," a waltz by Johann Strauss.

If a particle of dust appeared on the edge of the screen, she would call the booth on the interphone, ask for Ron and say, "If you call yourself a union projectionist you'll get that dirt off of the screen right now!" She had no time for Ron Desper and his union that required two men in the booth.

In those days, there were two projectors. A 2,000-foot reel ran about twenty minutes so we'd have to make five or six changeovers in the course of an average movie. Making a smooth changeover called for perfect projector threading and response to cue marks on the screen. Nowadays, all the film is spliced together and laid out on a platter feeding one projector.

After Frank Eckardt left, Henrietta hired managers. The first two didn't stay too long and then she hired Herb Graefe. Herb and I got along great. He was a good manager and I often went down and helped him set up promotions when I wasn't in the booth. After a year or so with the theaters, my usher friends and I went to work for the Consolidated paper company. In 1943, we went off to war, including Herb and, fortunately, we all returned. Herb went back to the theaters but eventually, he too joined Consolidated at their Consoweld division.

The theaters as we knew them are gone now. The MGM Lion still roars but the shadowy images of yesterday have for the most part been replaced by exploding cars, wild lifestyles and raunchy conversation. But for many of us, memories live on of the evenings folks used to dress up to go to the movies.



Paul Gross

Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune publisher Bill Huffman suggested this would make a good photo for Paul's obituary. That was in 1965.

Photo opposite: Paul in 1945 as an Air Corps projectionist at Drew Field. The equipment is identical to that at the Wisconsin theater.

In February 1947, an 8th Anniversary fete for the Wisconsin was held at Johnny's Supper Club, Wisconsin Rapids. Herb Graefe, theater manager, standing, with Mrs. Eckhardt.

Architect Donn Hougen with mustache. Mrs. Eckardt with flowered dress.

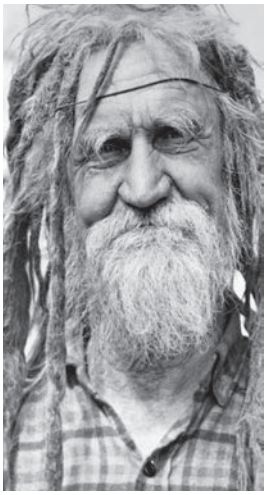
Paul Gross at the Museum, 2007. *Photo by Uncle Dave*

Best Wishes to
Mr. and Mrs. Eckardt
and the new
WISCONSIN THEATRE
WILPOLT'S RESTAURANT
Harry H. Wilpolt

Congratulations to
Mr. and Mrs. Eckardt
D&M BEAUTY SHOP
EXPERT BEAUTY SERVICE

Congratulations
Mr. and Mrs. Eckardt
WHITROCK'S PHARMACY
After the Show Enjoy a Delicious
Ice Cream Soda Made with
Luicks Ice Cream

SUGAR BOWL CAFE
Home Cooked Meals
Candy & Home Made
Ice Cream . . . . .
. . WISCONSIN RAPIDS, WIS. . .



Uncle Dave
(1980 Photo)

SWCHC chief Phil Brown convinced the camera-shy editor to print his photo like they do downtown; so here is a mug shot from when he was a cub reporter and weekend photograper at the *Daily Tribune*. If you spot him around town, be sure to give Uncle Dave a big hug.

Swampscott

The Year of the Museum included a trip by Dave and family to Witter country: Swampscott, Mass., where William Witter settled among Puritans; the Connecticut/Rhode Island border, where subsequent Witters moved to escape the Puritans; and Brookfield, N.Y., where our own J. D.W. was born. More about this later?

Forget Me Not

A dearly-departed friend of history, Glen Zieher (right), joined Andy Muchin (left), a Milwaukee-based chronicler of small town Judaism, for some boots-on-the-ground research into the history of the Arpin Jewish settlement. *Photo by Dave Engel*

History Center

Something new and exciting in the world of history: and we are beginning to adapt to it--through our "Digital History Center."

Anyone who has labored with a camera, copy stand and darkroom and can now conveniently scan a photograph on his desk top with near-perfect results...or who has traveled at great time and expense to far-flung libraries, historical societies, courthouses and cemeteries , can now send his mouse in search of the same information from the convenience of an office, i.e., "History Center."

Not to mention using digital means for keeping track of members and artifacts and photographs. And making all this stuff available to the wider world...well, you almost have to celebrate progress!

Unfortunately, this project is beyond our current budget capabilities. We need a pile of dollars for machinery and a digital-ready worker or two.

To receive *Artifacts* four times per year and become a member? Priceless at $15 to SWCHC, 540 Third St. S., Wisconsin Rapids, WI 54494.

South Wood County Historical Corp.
540 Third Street South
Wisconsin Rapids WI 54494

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