

# Artifacts

February 2011

Volume II #28



*Cover by Oliver, see page 2.* Phil Brown, p. 2; Lori Brost, 2-3; Holly Knoll, 4; Gilardi by Uncle Dave, 5; Howe School by Earle Garber, 6-7; Gene Johnson photos & stories, 7, 19-27; Lawrence Oliver photos & stories, 8-17; Pinball by Paul Gross, 28-31; Vesper Air Mail photo by Oliver, 32.





## *Den of Antiquity*

Paul Gross hands over proceeds from sale of his historical videos to SWCHC president Phil Brown. SWCHC is a sponsor of Paul's unique series.

The May *Artifacts* will feature Phil and his Den of Antiquity historical collection which will coincide with the new exhibit of the same name in the Museum's J. Marshall Buehler Gallery.

## **Lori: Homely Update**

*On a recent visit to my Grandparents' house, I was greeted by a trio of old friends ~ Homely, Raggedy Ann and Andy.*

*In the August 2010 Artifacts, I shared childhood memories of one of my favorite dolls and our times together at Gramma's house, our 'rides' on the couch and even our 'accidents' from Big Red's driving and my mother's dislike for a doll.*

*Thirty years later, she still has the same response every time. "That was the ugliest doll I've ever seen!"*

*By contrast, after all these years, I have to say it still brings a huge smile to my face to see them lined up and ready to go.*



Cover: from *River City Memoirs* (#1), quoting photo subject Nick Zieher: "They were painting Dassow's [Vesper] store when Charlie Wussow swatted a hornet. Lawrence Oliver picked it off the ground and dreamed up that picture." The result graced the August 1942 issue of *Field & Stream* magazine, one of many Oliver publications using hunting guide Zieher as a model. "The big shots would come over here to hunt," Zieher told Uncle Dave, "but some of them couldn't hit a bull in the ass with a scoop shovel." The version of the hornet photo used here was hand colored and shows a different pose than the *Field & Stream* version.



*A wall chart in the Museum's Country Kitchen exhibit shows 1932 prices of common food items.*

## Comparison Shopping

*by Lori Brost*

In 1932, for 25 cents you could see Spencer Tracy and Bette Davis in *20,000 Years in Sing Sing* or Marlene Dietrich in *Blonde Venus*.

The 1932 Olympic games were held in Los Angeles and Lake Placid, the USA winning a total of 47 gold, 36 silver and 32 bronze medals.

In 1932, *Good Housekeeping* magazine was telling women that low backs and velvet fabrics with a fur cape or velvet wrap were strongly suggested for the Christmas season and reported that 45 out of 50 women were wearing white eveningwear.

Dec. 18, 1932, brought the first true playoff game in the National Football League. The game was to be held at Wrigley Field, Chicago, but due to blizzard conditions the game was moved inside to the Chicago Stadium where the Chicago Bears defeated the Portsmouth Spartans 9 to 0.

*And, in 1932, a family of five could buy groceries for a week for \$10.28.*

In 2011, a movie ticket for a child is \$6 and an adult \$9, an increase of 2400% and 3600% over 1932.

*Good Housekeeping's* fashion trends for 2011 include an oversized sweater, pleated skirt, a fringed purse and a great white shirt.

Jan. 23, 2011, the Green Bay Packers defeated the Chicago Bears in the NFL championship game 21 to 14.

*And the equivalent shopping list from 1932 now will cost you about \$139.46, an increase of almost 1390%.*

	<u>1932</u>		<u>2011</u>
15 lbs potatoes	.23		4.50
3 cans whole tomato	.20		5.07
2 lbs white sugar	.10		1.37
2 lbs butter	.50		6.34
½ dozen bananas	.10		1.18
4 lbs apples	.23		5.16
28 quarts milk	3.36		23.52
3 lbs pot roast	.57	Rump roast	8.97
2 lbs cod	.34		12.58
1 lb can salmon	.10		2.89
1 pkg corn flakes	.08		1.78
2 lbs flour	.08		2.19

## *artifacts: the old-fashioned kind*

**By Holly Knoll**

SWCHC Museum Staff

Five years ago, when I was a volunteer for the UWSP Museum of Natural History, my instructor, Ray Reser, brought in a cache of projectile points loaned by the SWCHC Museum for a display in the University library. Now I am working at the same SWCHC Museum with the same points I created a display with while a college student, helping to identify and record every artifact with the help of my past instructor, Reser. Each point must be examined closely to identify what type of projectile point it is, what material it is made out of, the time period it came from and any marks that tell a story.

In some of the items Reser and I have looked at so far, are found evidence they held numerous lives before they were discarded or lost. When we identified breaks caused by hitting bone, one point told us the owners first used it for hunting. The same point showed signs of being discarded or accidentally kicked into a fire, causing round bowl-shaped fragments to be taken out of the rock (called pot-lidding). Someone found that projectile point in the fire remains and decided it could still be used by resharpening the edges and using it as a knife. This was displayed in the rock by sharpness to the upper part of the stone but dullness in the lower portion which would have been attached to a handle.

Reser also took a look at the copper spearpoint that was photographed for the November 2010 "Artifacts." He said it is probably 5-6,000 years old rather than the previously-thought 3,000. The copper could have been found locally, cold hammered and folded to create a thicker point.

The information obtained from these projectile points creates a vivid image of activities many years ago in central Wisconsin.

SWCHC projectile point, commonly and often erroneously named "arrowhead," placed on microscope for detailed study by archaeologist Ray Reser, director of the UWSP Museum.



### *Photo Viewing Thingy Update*

An enthusiastic group joined the January 12 program at the Museum as old *Tribune* photos taken by Don Krohn were projected on a large screen. Depending on when you get this, you may be able to attend the Photos of Lawrence Oliver program February 9 at 1:30 p.m.

Also on the *Thingy* agenda are the following photo discussions:

**Wisconsin Rapids West Side**

March 9, 6:30-8 p.m.

**Wisconsin Rapids East Side**

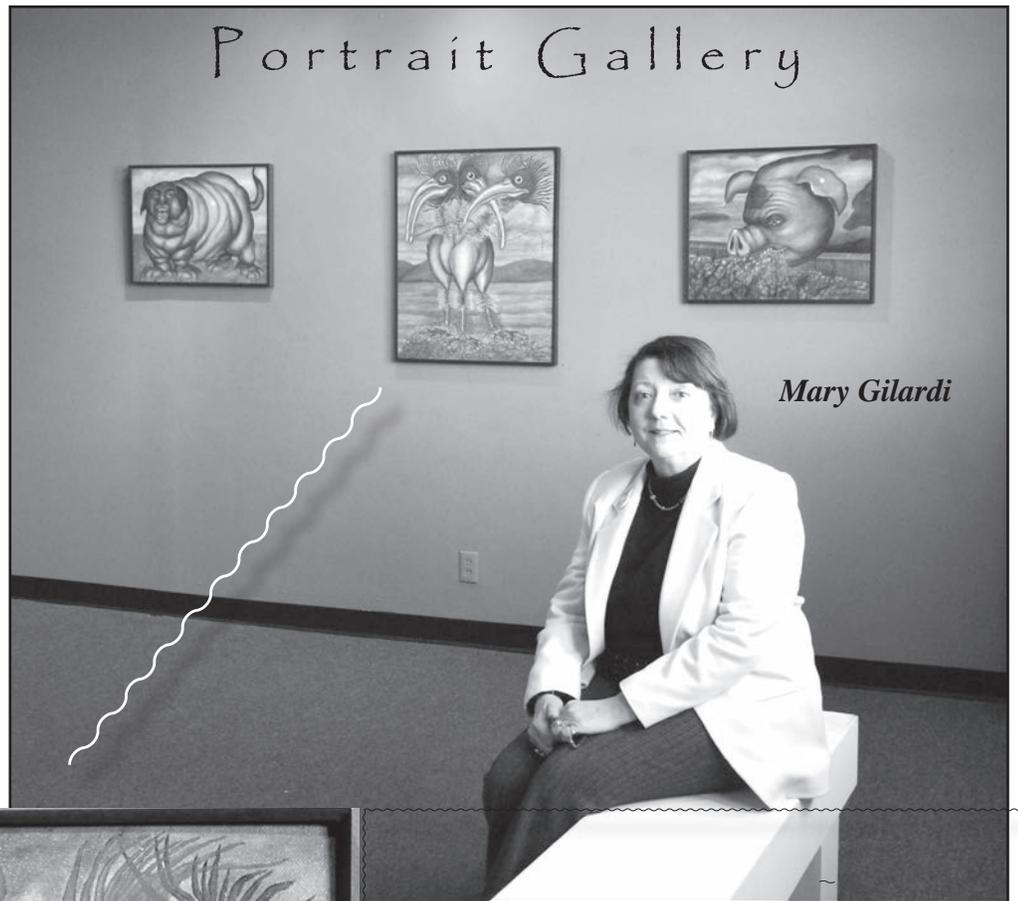
April 13 1:30-3 p.m.

*At the Museum. Free and open to the public.*

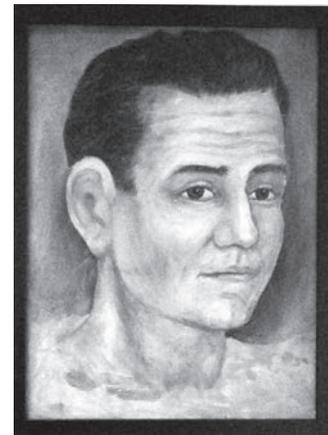
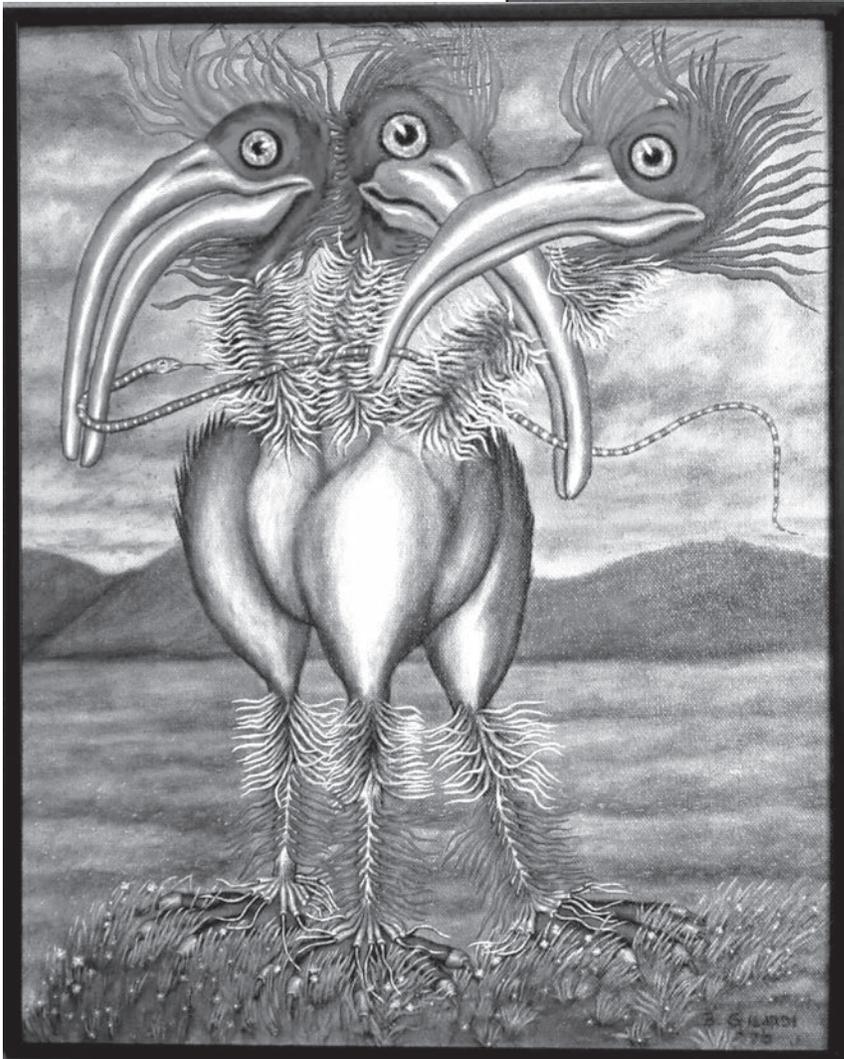
Uncle Dave and family caught the last day of the Bernard Gilardi display at Portrait Gallery in Milwaukee's Historic Third Ward.

According to Gallery curator and former *Daily Tribune* arts editor Debra Brehmer, the strikingly original compositions attracted a lot of attention.

"They're kinda weird," a buyer of three Gilardi's said, "but they're great!" Gilardi's daughter, Mary, right, said her father was a modest sort who made no attempt at fame.



*Mary Gilardi*



From Portrait Society Exhibit: Bernard Gilardi (1920-2008) worked as a lithographer for a printing company and lived in a small house on Milwaukee's near North Side. Having always been interested in art, he started painting in the late 1950s. He continued to make oil paintings throughout his life in his basement studio. By the time he died in 2008, at the age of 88, he had completed about 400 paintings. Portrait Society is pleased to present Bernard Gilardi's legacy to the public for the first time.

## Howe School: The Rock on the Hill

By Earle Garber

During late spring of 1937, Dad and Mother loaded the kid sister and me into the grey '34 Dodge for the move from the 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue duplex, a cut-up house Grandpa had moved from a mill construction site to face his warehouse at what is now a parking lot next to Number 16 paper machine.

Grandpa had purchased the "old Habeck farmhouse" on the corner of Apple and Eighth streets and remodeled it exactly as Mom ordered, including a space for a car, a big deal in those days.

The decision to move had been all about location. We would live on a paved street where we no longer had to skip and hop over mud puddles next to railroad tracks. Mom could shop at the McCamley grocery [220 8th St. S.], kiddy corner from the house. Shurfine products impressed her. The two of us would wait patiently for Ken, the owner, to finish writing up Mom's purchases for the week before he could dig into the bucket to extract a long tube of Blue Moon ice cream for a tall cone.

The move from the West Side took place when the scarlet fever quarantine was lifted by Doc Pomainville. My kid sister and I were bundled up for the ride cross town, bumping over hose after hose as dad snaked around firefighting equipment spraying water onto the flaming roof of the Montgomery Ward block, a sight we would never forget.

From our house, it was all of four blocks to Howe school. From the looks of the early Howe School, it's apparent the building was no charm to attend classes in. For children whose residence was west of 8<sup>th</sup> Street, the walk was uphill and the climb to classes was a challenge for kindergartners and first graders. For those of us older pupils on up to fourth grade, there were two more flights of stairs inside.

School was in session. My sister, a kindergartner on her first day, grabbed me, letting go as Mom's firm hand pointed toward school, saying, "take her hand and walk."

There was grass in front of the building along 8<sup>th</sup> street, but the back hill on the west side was a sandy mound, suitable for children only when snow fell. We would bring garbage can covers or, provided by dads who worked at the paper mill, sheets of corrugated paperboard, for the ride on whatever snow fell the night before. Then, mud-caked, if you were lucky, you were sent home or told to dry off in the school basement in front of the massive wood burning furnace while janitor Skinny Morell listened to your woes.

That first class in fourth grade was taught by Miss Wilcox. It was one I will always remember.

My new friend Don sat to my right. A gal named Joan Staub, the class artist, was on my left, and a lovely redhead named Ann, who had freckles deeper than the stained wood floor in front of me, told me her father managed a fancy ladies ready-to-wear store in the Wood Block downtown, called Heilman's. She knew she was smart. It was impossible for a kid like me to take my eyes off her.

During that second week of school, multiplication table tests were handed out. Being a recent newcomer it was a sinking feeling for me to be sure when Miss Wilcox made the announcement; but there were two perfect scores: me and lovely Ann. It made my day.

Then I learned it would be the year Ann's father would move his family to Arizona. It was also the semester I figured out my friend Joan, who appeared threatened by my attention to Ann, began passing notes showing me how to draw things girls thought about.

*The Howe school Earle Garber (and Joan Haasl) attended. It was replaced by a “modern” structure when former Howe scholar and SWCHC Board member, Nick Brazeau, was in first grade.*

*Photo from Gene Johnson. See more stories and photos starting on p. 18.*



Irene at the corner of Saratoga and 8th Streets with the old Howe school in the background. Age 16

# Identity Theft

## *Invading the Privacy of Lawrence Oliver, Artistic Photographer*

It was probably 1983 or 1984, while working at the *Daily Tribune*, that the newly-designated Wisconsin Rapids City Historian and *Tribune* historical columnist who would become Uncle Dave got a call from Barrett's auction service. After a local photographer named Lawrence Oliver had died, his estate was dispersed, except for a box of personal items and photographs that remained. Interested?

Or course. Oliver had been already mentioned by Nick Zieher, one of his subjects, as a Vesper, Wis., photographer and "confirmed bachelor," the only son of banker and real estate agent Owen Oliver and Lydia Pfeiffer Oliver. Owen Oliver, according to local history sources, was a Genesee Depot native (b. 1865) who had influenced numerous settlers to come to Wood County, especially between 1894 and 1912.

Born Nov. 22, 1906, in Waukesha County, the photographer, Lawrence, was himself a veteran of World War II. He operated a photo studio in Vesper until his death in 1983.

More important to posterity than his studio portraits are the outdoor feature-style compositions meant to be published in newspapers and magazines. The examples offered in the next few pages were included in Oliver's effects, along with his wallet, library card, social security card, driver's license, last medical bills and other papers a stranger would not normally see.



Lawrence  
Oliver's  
wallet  
and contents

*Photos  
by Holly Knoll*



# Identification Please

Even a professional photographer such as Lawrence Oliver is prone to one of the most common historical lapses: unidentified photos. The result for survivors is a puzzle. It seems likely that the persons pictured here are the artist's parents, Owen and Lydia Oliver.

Note that his family photos are formally posed, carefully framed and artistically rendered rather than the "in action" shots of a journalist. Note the balance in the garden photo (below) between the house and the figure at lower right; same (opposite page) with the sign at left and the buggy at right.

Rural and Graded Schools  
WOOD COUNTY, WISCONSIN

Dist. No 1... (Village) of *Hansen*...  
Town

REPORT OF

*Lawrence Oliver*

*Upper*... From *Eighth*... Grad

For year ending June 30, 1921.

MONTHS	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th
Reading.....	65	80	85	89	92	94	97	98	
Spelling.....	92	92	92	93	95	96	97	98	
Writing.....	94	94	94	94	96	98	98	98	
Arithmetic...	62	69	75	79	100	100	100	98	
Geography..									
Language	63	73	79	81	80	94	96	96	
Grammar.....									
Physiology..				85	89	90			
History.....	65	71	80	82	89	96	97	97	
Civics.....	94	92	93	94		88	86		
Agriculture..	90	92	94	95	95	96	96	96	
Sewing	89	93			100	100	100		
Manual Train									
Music.....	75	80	85	85	83	86	86	88	
Home Tasks..									
Days Absent...	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Times Tardy..	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Department..	80	96	98	98	98	100	100	98	

Promoted to... *High School*... Grade for year beginning July 1, 1921.

... *Sophia E. Nelson*... Teac



Below: Mrs. Lydia Oliver?

*In his photogenic prime, Owen Oliver, father of Lawrence, if indeed it is he, bears a resemblance to the equally handsome SWCHC Board member Barry Jens.*

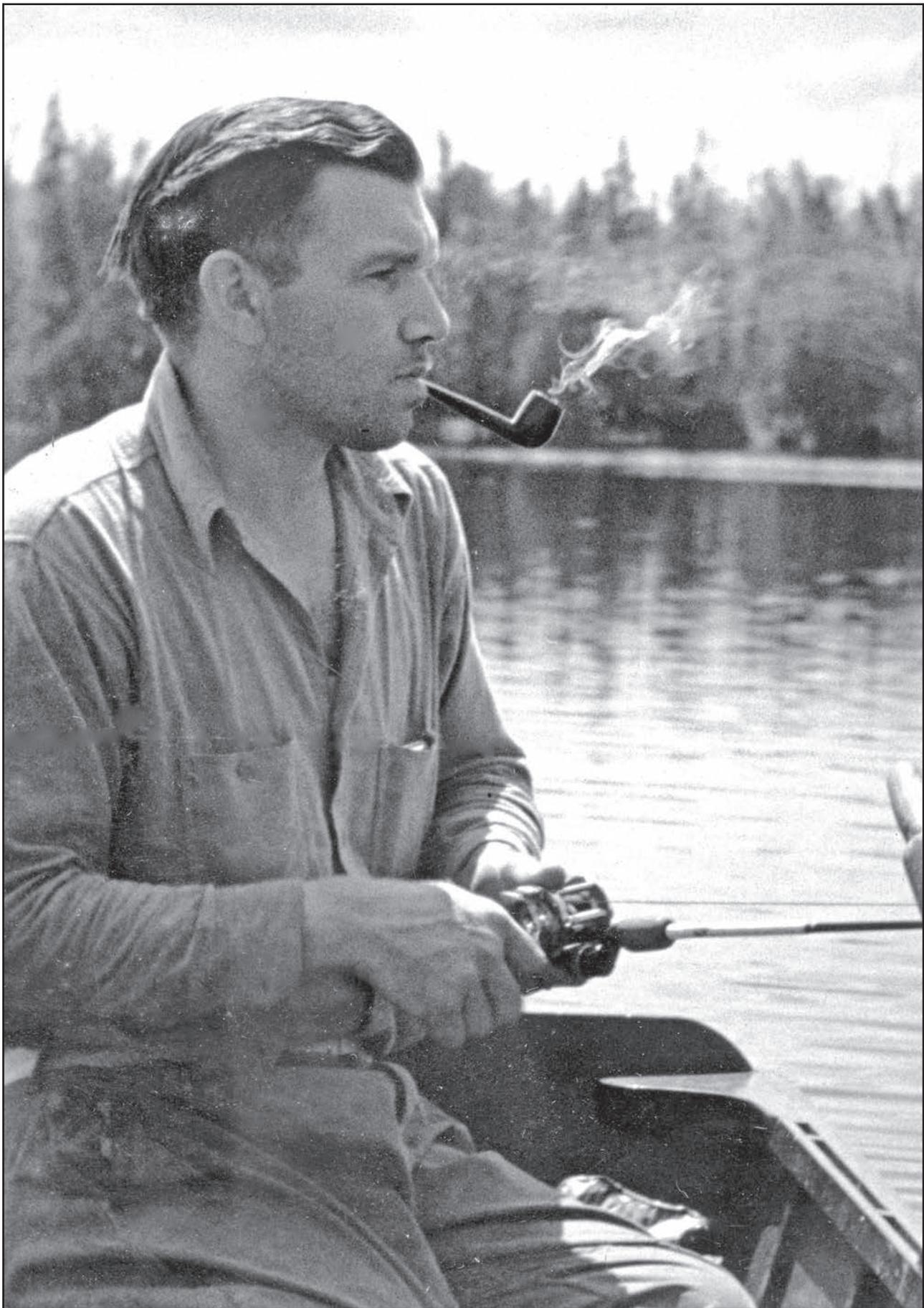
*Owen Oliver (below) and George E. Martin established the Vesper State Bank in 1911.*

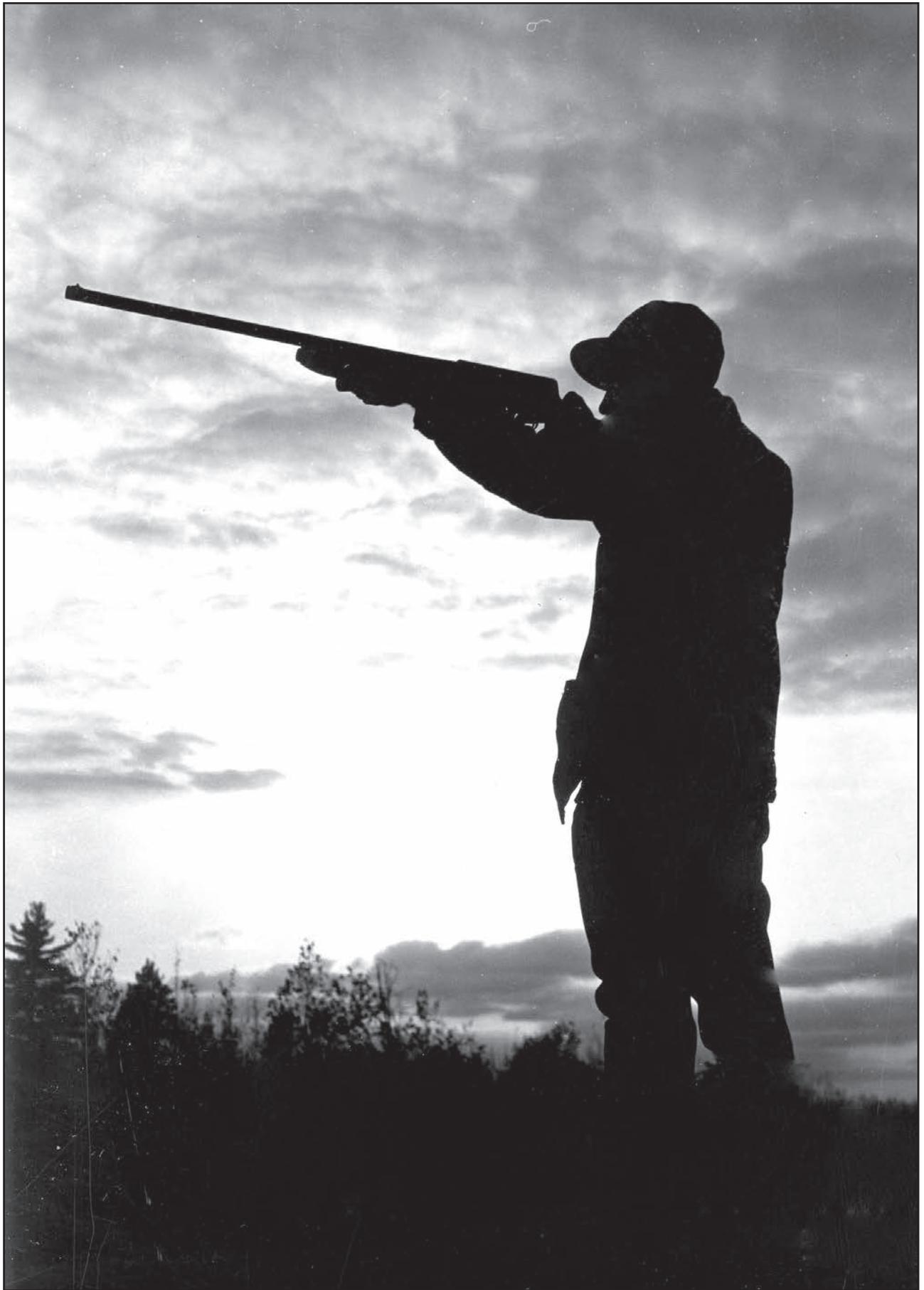




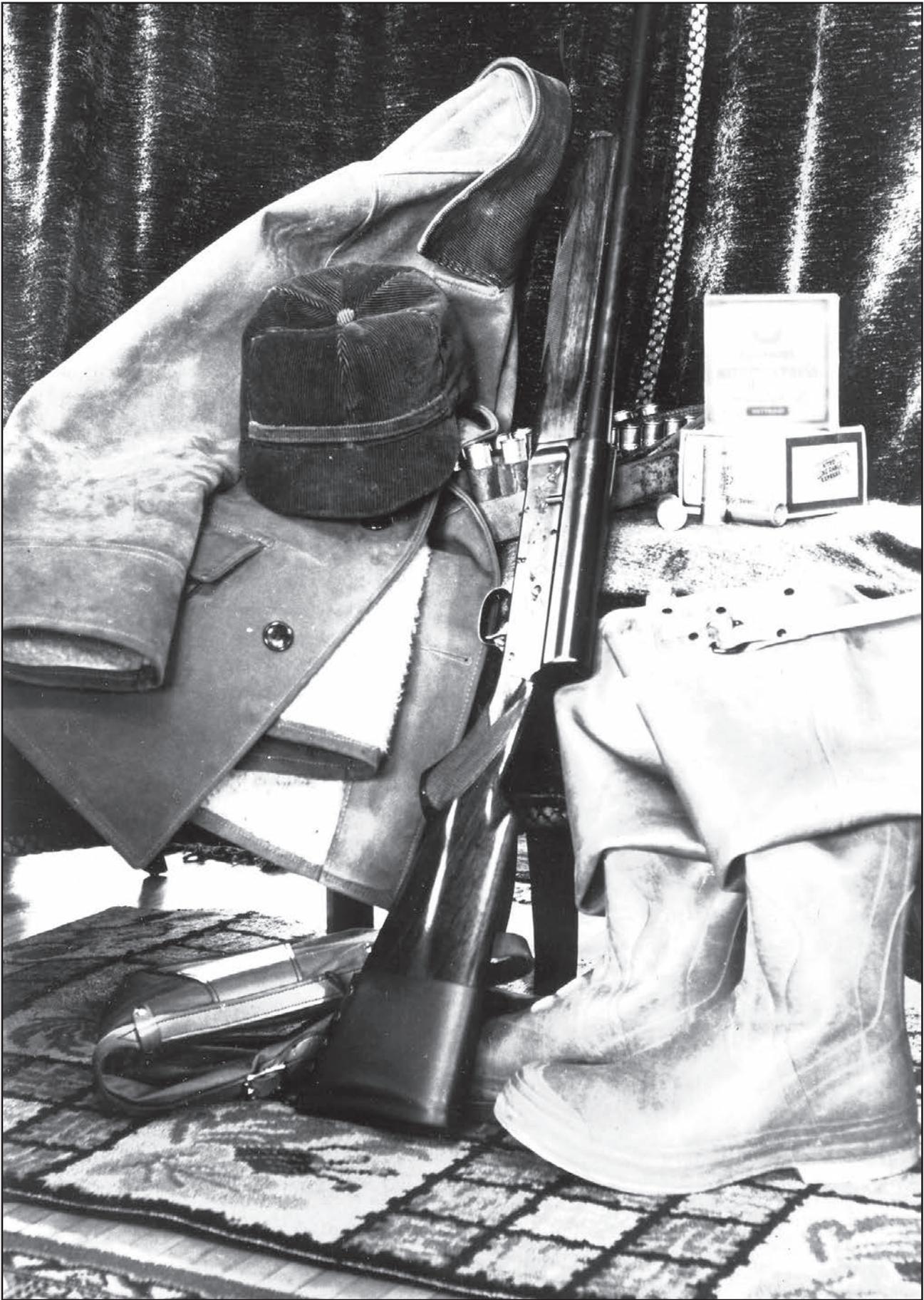


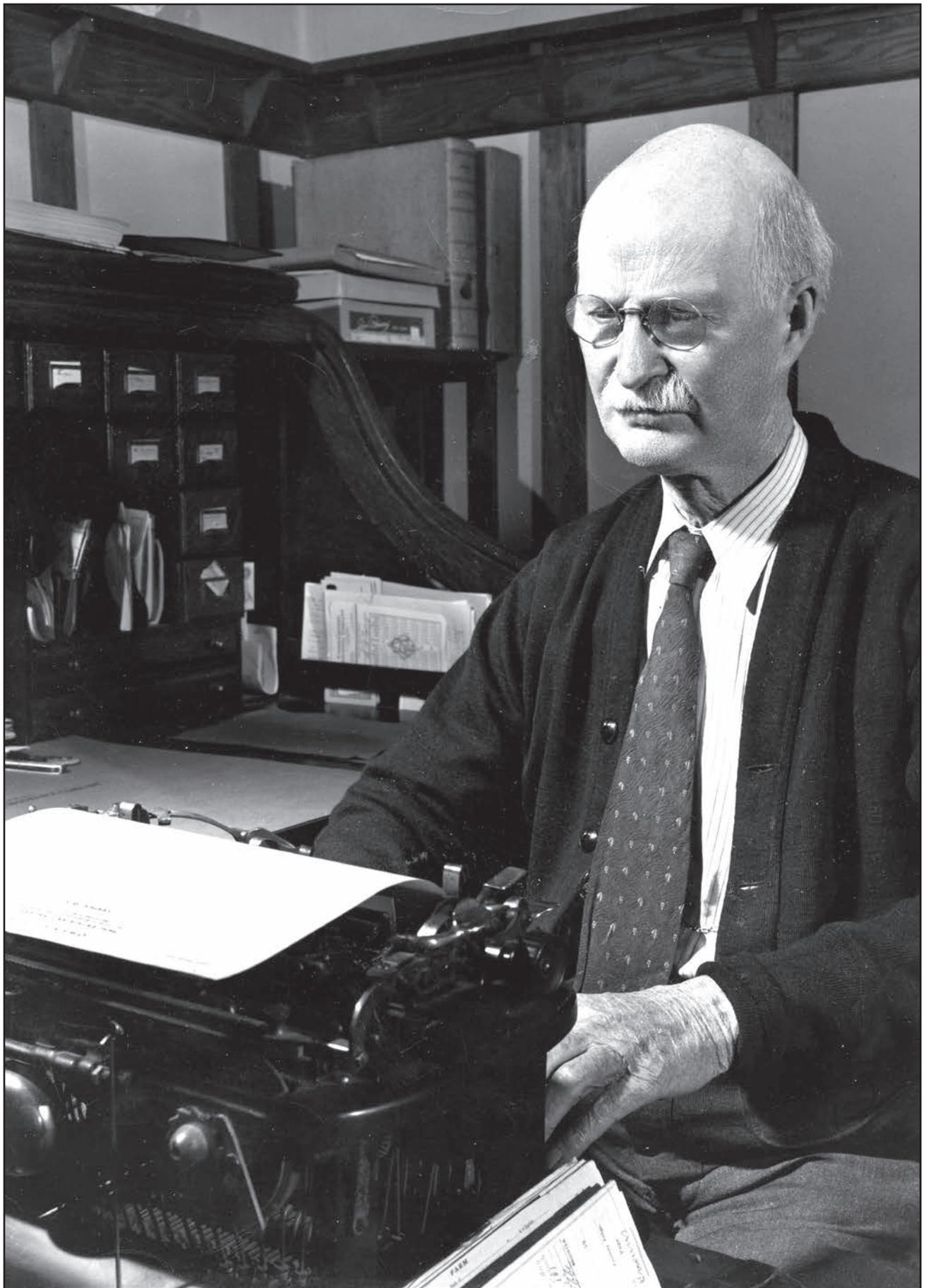
*Zieher with pike*





*A classic*



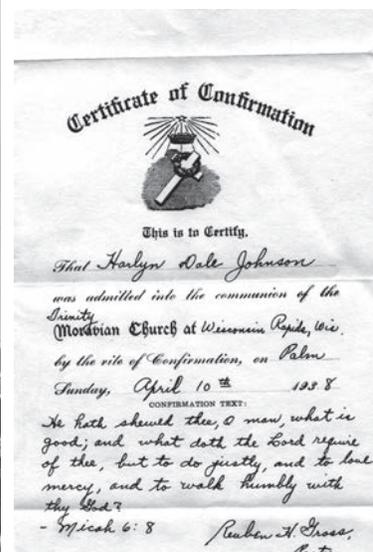


*Stationery reads, "Owen Oliver"*



Gene (right) with his brothers Roger and Dale at the apartment house at southside.(centralia) Age 3 year old.

( Rev. Gross, Arnold Sell, Dale Johnson, Ralph Johnson. (F) Lounais Goden, Lois Hagen Helen Fredrickson.



## By Gene Johnson

*Dogtown Correspondent*

### The Phantom of Boles Street

This remembrance is the result of an estate sale visited in June 2007.

From the household rummage, I was able to purchase several church directories, a source commonly used to create local history stories. Among the other paper artifacts I purchased was a cigar box filled with Roman Catholic shrine and memorial religious cards.

While sorting through the cards later in the day, discarding memorials of persons we did not know, a funeral card stirring an old time memory appeared: that of Jack Schenk, a long-forgotten neighbor from the Johnson homestead neighborhood on Boles Street.

Brother Dale and I were living with our family in 1938 when we moved to 411 Boles street (later to be designated 1411 Boles). I was ten years old, and Dale, 14.

Each lot in this subdivision was 66 feet wide, but ours was a double lot. Rather than the usual 66 by 135 feet, it was a whopping 1342 feet deep. We later learned that, when surveyed many years earlier, a land-locked "lost lot" was created and our property was a part of this faulted survey. Heavily wooded and brush covered, this area adjoining our backyard garden was a dense forest-like section of undeveloped space.

Several hundred yards away, behind a wall of trees and brush, busy Second Avenue ran along the Wisconsin River on the way to Port Edwards. The riverbank was a park, but on the west side of this busy road were quality homes with a lovely river view.

One of the affluent home owners was the operator of the intercity bus line, John Schenk Sr., who housed his bus line in a large garage on Second Avenue at Seneca Road.

Our family had no relationship with the

Schenks, who inhabited a completely different neighborhood from the Boles Street folks. Our home was bare bones, tarpaper covered and without sewer and water service.

Like many boys of that age, my brother, Dale, soon built what was called a shack. It had a shed roof; no windows; was weatherproof; and inside and out was as neat as a pin. The dimensions and furnishings are long forgotten, but at ten years old it seemed to be the epitome of boyhood. Dale had a place of his own!

No one but Dale and his friends were allowed in the shack, and whatever treasures my brother possessed were housed there. I was allowed to peek, but never had the honor of using the shack in any way. The door was solid and locked with a combination padlock. Tucked into the woods, it was a very special sanctuary.

Then a memorable thing happened. When Dale went to the locked shack, he found inside a single note, signed, "The Phantom." Nothing was touched or moved, just the note. Dale assumed he had left his shack unlocked, and wondered what smart aleck could have visited his bailiwick.

Not long after, another note appeared. The Phantom had struck again. This time there was no doubt about it; someone had unlocked the door. Again, nothing was missing or disturbed, just a mocking note left behind.

After another note or two from the Phantom was found, the combination lock was replaced by a sturdy padlock with a key.

Dale didn't find out that the "Phantom" was Jack Schenk for a number of years, but somewhere along the line, the secret was out, and a good laugh was enjoyed by all.

## Courting: Once Upon A Time

By Gene Johnson

When we relate our family heritage to our grandchildren, we tell stories of eras so vastly different from the present that it seems that “once upon a time” or “long long ago” are the only ways we can start the narrative.

The streetcar is only a youthful memory to this story teller. Our children, and our children’s children, will have to experience the streetcar through museums, movies and television. Likewise, the saloon, which was gone when our generation was born, has become the symbol of the “wild west” and the “gay nineties.” Yet, as we find in this story, both the streetcar and the saloon were part of our Johnson families’ formation in old Grand Rapids.

Courting in 1917 involved a mix of the old and new. In the transportation mix were automobiles, horse and buggy and public transportation, using the auto bus and the horse livery. In our then progressive Tri-City area from 1909-1931, there was also available a small interurban streetcar line that ran from the bridge on the west side of Grand Rapids down the river to Port Edwards and Nekoosa and back. Postcard views in my collection show the second-hand street cars of the GRSRY Co. (Grand Rapids Street Railway) to be nicely kept up, and the streetcar car barn and some rails were still in place during my boyhood.

In 1917, the streetcar fare was five cents one way, at a time when nickels were scarce for young lovers. The twenty cent fare to Nekoosa and back made for an expensive date.

Nekoosa was a booming paper mill town. Its dozen saloons for a population of 1,500 included Andrew Zurfluh’s “Palace Saloon” which attracted some young lovers from Grand Rapids. Although the saloon was supposed to cater only to voting age adults, young lovers were allowed to sneak in. My mother and father, Tena Rose Vanderploeg and John Swen Johnson, would ride to Nekoosa, spend the evening at Zurfluh’s, and then return on the late streetcar.

In her old age, my mother recalled that, on a typical date, the young lovers would arrive by streetcar at the Palace, where a five cent schooner of beer entitled the buyer to the free lunch, which included beef, smoked fish, cheeses, homemade breads and fresh vegetables.

They would order two beers and nurse their drinks while enjoying the lunch. Owner Andrew Zurfluh would saunter over and proceed to “introduce” them to a well-heeled patron and this new “friend” would buy the young folks another round of beer.

I looked up Andrew Zurfluh in my historical records, and found him to be in the saloon business from 1899 through 1917 when prohibition changed the bars into bowling alleys, confectioneries and soft drink parlors. When prohibition ended, Andrew Zurfluh was back

in the business, and remained so through 1950, a long career for this successful businessman who so nicely touched on the Johnson family history. He died in 1952.



This photo is believed to be of a class at the Grand Rapids Business College. Tena VanderPloeg is in the back row, second from the left. Mary VanderPloeg is standing next to her in the center back row. This picture should date 1917 or 1918. (No ID on any of the other persons pending research of the Grand Rapids College records.)



Ball Team, Denniston, Anderson, Nobles,  
Karreseboom, Klappa, Gene, Top, Musch,  
Roach and Grampsch.

**From Gene's Album**

## Johnson Hill

By Gene Johnson

Nearly all of our earliest family history remembrances of the Johnson Hill department store come from my wife Irene's more affluent side of the family. As a little girl, she found the whole store beautifully decorated with Christmas finery, and in the basement level, shelf after shelf of toys.

My first recollection of the store was when I first experienced an elevator. This was probably at age ten, when our move to the Boles Street homestead had brought me a wealth of new playmates. We boys "hung around" the Johnson Hill elevator and when store patrons chose to ride up to the second and third floors, we embarked as well. It was an exhilarating new experience.

Looking back, no other elevator in Wisconsin Rapids comes to mind, although the old Wood County Courthouse may well have operated a lift.

At age twelve, Irene was thrilled with the purchase of her filmy and fancy confirmation dress, purchased from Johnson Hill. A 1941 family history photo shows Irene in a pretty flowered Easter dress, again from Johnson Hill. The weather turned cold and she didn't get to wear it on Easter.

Johnson Hill's clothing department was the largest in town, dwarfing J.C. Penney and Heilman's. Impressive outside display windows on both the ground floor and second floor facing West Grand Avenue primarily featured clothing. The first and second story display windows facing Third Avenue highlighted other miscellaneous department items, including foodstuffs.

Irene's dad, Carl Bautz, purchased the family meat through Johnson Hill, unlike his father, August, who walked down the hill to Link's Meat Market on Oak Street. Irene's mother, Agnes, ordered by phone from the accommodating butcher in Johnson Hill's lower level. One reason for this arrangement was a chatty friend, who worked in the JH meat department. Johnson Hill butcher shop deliveries were made by a bespectacled "Doc" Gross in his venerable panel truck.

Each payday, Agnes took Irene in tow and walked down to the Wood County bank, cashed Carl's paycheck and crossed over the Grand Avenue Bridge to Johnson Hill's to pay the bill. At the top of a short flight of east side stairs was the JH "office" with a long counter for credit account payments. Irene also remembers a horseshoe-shaped ice cream counter up near the office.

The shoe department featured the city's only "fluoroscope," an X-ray type device that made viewing how your shoe fit, possible. Irene didn't purchase her shoes there. Brand-named footwear was considered "too expensive."

It was a true department store. Irene can remember Johnson Hill's had a separate "hat" department. In the 1940s, when Irene's Lincoln high sewing class called for specialized materials, here again, Johnson Hill was the Wisconsin Rapids store with the widest selection.

At high school age, Irene and her friend, Donna Ferris, enjoyed browsing at Heilman's and Johnson Hill after school. "Window shopping" was a social activity at the time.

Prior to the advent of television, it seemed the whole city swarmed to a thriving four block West Side market place on Friday night to shop, socialize and browse. During my employment as a part time clerk at Montgomery Ward, it was commonplace to see many "regulars" every Friday night.

When I was working at Montgomery Ward, a natural place for a teenager to find just the right "young mans" clothing was the Jerrold's store next door, where garrulous Ed Bredow talked the talk and sold a lot. It was only when Jerrold's closed that I came to know a second super clothing salesman, Harvey Solie at Johnson Hill menswear. Harvey knew sports, and a clothes buying visit with him was a joy. When the prosperity of my Consolidated employment came along, Harvey became my main clothing man.

Irene meanwhile, "shopped around" and bought her clothing from Penney's, Heilman's and LeRay's, even buying her lacy "wedding" panties and slip at the prestigious Newton's womens' wear, considered an "upper crust store."

When the Johnson family first moved in from the farm in 1938, the depression was still deep. Most of our family clothing needs were obtained from the J.C. Penney and Spiegel mail order catalogs. Food not home grown in our large garden or hatched and raised (chickens, ducks) came from Romanski's Meat Market and Grocery, a carryover from our life on the old Boles farm.

Irene and I set up housekeeping in 1952 after my stint in Korea and, like her mother, Irene "liked" the butcher shop at Johnson Hill. We struck up a friendship with the handsome young butcher and enjoyed his banter and service. He provided little "extras"; I think he had a bit of a "thing" for the lovely young Irene.

Irene's cosmetics and our over the counter hygiene and health care sundries were bought at the east side Ben Franklin "five and ten" and the large Woolworth "dime store" across Third Avenue from the big JH store.

Johnson Hill provided numerous other personal and household items for the fledgling Johnson family. Here we found our small appliances, sporting goods, and the ammunition for my numerous guns. Our tableware china (Mikasa-Blue daisies) is still in use today. Irene bought her lingerie from schoolmate Donna Schott who worked that JH department.

The Johnson Hill jewelry department is where I bought all of Irene's Christmas and birthday presents. Department head Shirley Sering (Dolly) ran the second floor jewelry store. When Johnson Hill closed, a friendly bond had grown for this personable young sales lady and we followed "Dolly" to her new employer, Schmidt's Jewelry.

The Johnson Hill store was then (and perhaps always was) a small cut above J.C. Penney's in

quality. Over the years, I've often wondered if the JH store long term patrons were mostly made up of Preway and Consolidated employees who were the more prosperous citizens in Wisconsin Rapids.

We hated to see Johnson Hill's close. Kline's didn't seem to have the warmth, charm or tradition of Johnson Hill.

My clothing needs were transferred to Frank Abel's menswear and yet another super salesman, Earl Schanock. Here the attentive and personal service led to a pleasing and fruitful long term relationship.

Real photo postcards of 1910 era Wisconsin Rapids proudly featured the Johnson Hill building, an anchor of the West Side business district that was alive, throbbing and vigorous.



*GJ on the West Side, Johnson Hill far left*

Buddies, Ray Lecy  
and Gene in 1942



Gene and Gerald Mathews at Lincoln High in  
the early fall of 1945. Water tower removed  
in 1962. This photo was used in the 1946  
school year annual.



## Montgomery Ward

By Gene Johnson

The end of the year 2000 brought a note of personal sadness with the notification in the press that the Montgomery Ward department store chain was going out of business. This did not come as a great surprise. The chain, which had become a subsidiary of General Electric Corp., had gone into Chapter 11 bankruptcy. At the end, Montgomery Ward had only one operating store in the state of Wisconsin, at Green Bay. The last store in the Wisconsin Valley had been at Rhineland.

The personal sadness was due to the many wonderful memories nurtured within the several years Irene and I worked for the company. After my career as a newspaper carrier, while a junior at Lincoln High School, Montgomery Ward was my first “real” job, with pay by the hour and time cards. Irene had already held two other “time card” type jobs and was now working at the Ben Franklin store.

Getting the job at the Wisconsin Rapids Montgomery Ward store is a classic tale of friends. A high school buddy, Ray Lecy, had worked at Wards as a janitor’s helper and this bright ambitious friend had been promoted to floor clerk. Ray thought I would be a good successor for his janitor job and, through his intervention, the job was mine.

Parting from the paper boy job was not easy. I had held a *Wisconsin Rapids Daily Tribune* and Sunday *Milwaukee Sentinel* route for over three years and liked the responsibility and customer interaction. Both paper routes included our family home on Boles Street and my whole playground neighborhood, which was lovingly called “Dogtown.”

The janitor’s helper job at Wards consisted of assisting the freight handler, running errands, washing windows, cleaning the rest rooms and sweeping the wooden main floor at the end of each day. The freight man, Bob Rivers, was a nice guy who loved his job and was good at it. Freight was delivered to an alley back of the store, loaded onto an elevator and brought down to be “checked in.”

Montgomery Ward was located at the west end of the Grand Avenue Bridge, now the NewPage parking lot. It was a handsome brick building with

large exterior display windows facing the river on the east and Grand Avenue on the north.

The first floor had the departments: hardware, automotive, plumbing and electric, sporting goods, building and housewares, plus a compact and highly productive mail order department, headed by Vi Strass. A wide interior north stairway served public access to the second floor furniture department. At the top of the stairs, Harlow Ebbe, a master salesman, greeted each customer like an old friend. The second floor office was a small partitioned off area in the south east corner facing the stairway. Here held forth a staff of older married women: Loretta, the financial person and usually three or four other file persons and order processors.

The basement was the storage area for all departments, including the mail order, plus a display materials room and a primitive men’s rest room. A large freight elevator tied the three floors together.

The store manager was Frank Stucky, a career Montgomery Ward professional. A moderator of good management talent, Stucky got things done in this very profitable and highly visible downtown Wisconsin Rapids business.

The assistant manager was Harold Meillier, the automotive sales department manager, a no-nonsense little man, humorless, but dedicated and forever in motion.

The rest of the sales force was venerable, made up of two long-term women employees, Mary Jane Sigler and Bernice Simkowski; Glen Mehlbrech in plumbing and heating; John Baumel in building supplies; and Elly Kersten in hardware. Teenager Ray Lecy was the store “go getter” who eagerly sought out and waited on customers in all departments, making him a favorite with manager Frank Stucky.

The business district of 1945 was located primarily on West Grand Avenue between 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Avenues. There was a smaller retail district on the east end of the Grand Avenue Bridge, anchored by Wood County Bank and a small J.C. Penney store.

Friday night was a big shopping night. Downtown stores were open until nine p.m. A block from Ward's, the big and beautiful movie theater, the Wisconsin, ran its second show at 9:15 to accommodate shoppers.

The sales and employee atmosphere, relaxed in the Ward's retail store, was tense in the mail order department, where Vi Strass ran a tight ship. The mail order department scored high nationally in sales percentage and efficiency. The overall Montgomery Ward store also did well, acknowledging that the downtown market was more or less captive and considering the sales force was an unusual mix.

Glen Mehlbrech was the superstar, a homespun older guy who had just the right disposition for interacting with the rural people who loved shopping at Montgomery Ward. This man sold furnaces, farm equipment, house repair items, paint and plumbing supplies in fantastic quantities. The Montgomery Ward company had some sort of gold award pin they gave to the super sales guys and Glen had one every year that I worked there.

He was never pushy, always laughing and laid back, while all the time fighting a losing battle with severe heart disease. I would often find Glen lying in the men's room along the wall on the cold basement floor. When asked if he was okay, Glen would say yes and I would go and tell manager Frank Stucky and everyone else would stay away.

Elly Kersten and John Baumel both were more or less average sales guys, department heads as such, who made modest commissions most of the time. The two ladies were gadflies. When I later became a sales clerk on Friday nights, their departments were my meal tickets. I would wait on customers while they chatted, but they never seemed to mind. When my romance with Irene Bautz flickered into flame in 1947, these two ladies proved to be kind friends.

Harold Meillier was a different story. No matter how busy, he resented "help" and was able to deflect and absorb potential sales by others in his department. I rarely rang up sales on his register.

In 1945, the pay for my janitor's helper job was twenty five cents an hour, I worked about two

hours a night, four to five on Fridays and eight hours on Saturday. Since I was still in school, I was not allowed to help when the manager and male department heads "mikosheened" the wooden first floor once a month.

I liked putting up window displays, and soon the department heads, who all hated the window trimming job, spread the word to the store manager. Ward's central office sent out standardized window trimming plans and had a mandatory schedule of display change dates. Any deviation was largely predicted by the type of stock the store handled and left lots of room for innovation.

Upon graduation from high school in the spring of 1946, I began full time work at Wards. Ray Lecy was gone by now and in addition to my janitorial job, I was also the window trimmer and part times sales person (I loved sales!). I received a dime an hour raise to thirty five cents, rode my bicycle to work six days a week and was incredibly happy in what now can be viewed as dead end employment. Interestingly, I recall Ward's always paid its employees in cash, in brown manila envelopes.

Irene began work in the catalog mail order department that fall, checking in freight and taking catalog orders on the ever ringing phones. The really great aspect of the Ward's experience was the Bautz/Johnson romance, from our first shy smiles to the lasting commitment which began there.

The Montgomery Ward store, Jerrold's Clothing and the large Nash Hardware that anchored the 100 block on West Grand Avenue were the heart and soul of the Wisconsin Rapids downtown business section in those very memorable years of the mid and late 1940s.

### Last Rites

MILWAUKEE JOURNAL SENTINEL

August 8, 2008

Swiss Colony buys Montgomery Ward catalog.

"Montgomery Ward closed its catalog and retail operations in 2001."



Engaged to be married and on a picnic at lake wa Zee Cha in 1951.



Gene and Dick James at the old ball field at tourist park. (Now site of the State Building)



Gene at lake Wa Ze Cha white beach in 1948

## The Four Roses

### *Adventures in the Pinball Game*

By Paul Gross

The year was 1937. I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Jerry Henry in 7<sup>th</sup>. I had a small 16mm movie projector; Jerry had his dad's 8mm projector. With a penny postcard, I sent away for a film rental catalog. When it arrived, Jerry and I studied the merits of the silent feature films listed, which evolved into a moneymaking idea. We made a proposal to Sister Veronica, principal of SS Peter & Paul.

What we planned was to rent a movie called "Little Church around the Corner," show the film in the school gym, charge five cents admission, and split the money 50-50 with the nuns.

Sister Veronica thought it was a great idea, especially in the depression era when money was hard to come by. Independent of ticket sales, Jerry and I went around town and sold screen advertising to eight or ten business places, such as Daly Music, City Gas, and Bossert Coal Co.

We ran the movie after school on a Friday and had a matinee on Sunday afternoon. Altogether, we sold almost 800 tickets, so the nuns ended up with almost twenty dollars.

My friend, Jerome J. Henry, was born on October tenth of 1924 to Frank and Mabel (Witte) Henry. Jerry's dad, Frank, was a local building contractor, a top professional in his trade. The family home was at 430 5<sup>th</sup> Street N.

Frank's first major project that I am aware of was the construction of the Mead-Witter block. His name really came to the forefront when, in 1930, he finished construction of our beautiful Junior High (Lincoln at the time) and the massive field house, at the time the largest in

the state outside of Madison. Frank J. Henry was the builder of many churches and fine structures locally and around the state that still stand as a testimonial to his expertise.

Jerry and I didn't have a lot of contact in high school, mostly because I lived in Milwaukee during my sophomore and junior years, although he did come down and visit for a week each summer and I did likewise to the Rapids. When I came back as a senior, Jerry and I would spin records for school dances and

we made a short silent movie we called "Us Kids in Gee Men."

In the spring of 1941, before graduation, I got a job selling shoes at Johnson & Hill for 21 and a half cents an hour. After a month or two, I was offered a job as assistant projectionist at the local theaters, mostly the Wisconsin, for a wonderful wage

increase to forty cents an hour. That brought on a closer relationship with my good friends and classmates "Robbie" Robinson and "Red" Pavloski who were theater ushers at the time. Remember those fancy uniforms and flashlights?

After graduation in 1941, I went to work for Consolidated Papers in the lab at Biron. Jerry worked with his dad as an estimator on bids. So it went until Uncle Sam called us into the military, Jerry in the Navy, me in the Air Corps.

After the war, Jerry went back to working for his dad. I returned to Consolidated. We made frequent trips to Chicago to take in some of the big jazz bands: Lionel Hampton, Duke Ellington, Tex Beneke and the like, always getting back to Rapids on time to get to work in the morning.

Then one day we bought a used pinball machine and installed it in a little West Side



*Paul Gross and friend*

restaurant called the Grand Avenue Grill. The machine got a good play, so we bought another and another and also got into juke boxes.

Then I became restless and left Consolidated. That summer, I ran outdoor movies two nights in Rapids and one night each in Bancroft, Vesper, and Milladore. The pinball and juke box business kept me busy in the daytime. Jerry covered evening contacts when I was not available.

I especially remember the 13<sup>th</sup> Street Grill, run by Roger and Jeanette

Yetter, where we had a pinball and a nice new small juke box. Jerry hated Guy Lombardo's music and vowed we would never have one of his records on any of our juke boxes. When Lombardo came out with an arrangement that was number one on the record lists, I bought one of the records and put it in the 13<sup>th</sup> Street Grill juke box. Of course I didn't tell Jerry. That day he went into the grill for lunch and the Lombardo record was playing. He pulled the plug, opened the machine, removed the record and broke it over his knee. The Yeters laughed about that for many years after.

One location where we always wanted to put a pinball machine was the Golden Gate, owned by a guy name Kupps from Milwaukee who had big ideas. The night before his fancy grand opening, Jerry and I stopped in to see if we could get a machine in the place. We met Kupps near the door where he was moving a cigarette machine. His answer was, "Pinball machine, no way, can't you see I'm throwing out this cigarette machine? I'm having cigarette girls." Kupps even had orchids flown in from Hawaii

for the ladies that opening night.

After the big opening, business at the Golden Gate dropped off dramatically. Jerry and I kept trying to put a machine in, with no luck.

One Saturday in the spring of 1947, I said to Jerry, "Let's try the Golden Gate one more time."

Jerry said, "What for? Kupps won't change his mind."

"Well this time I'm going to insult him. I'm going to say, if this place is so classy, how come you took the handle off of the hot water faucet in the men's room?"

So in we went. By this time I had heard that business was so bad that the waitresses had to take their pay out of the cash register. I just said, "Kupps do you realize that if you just give us a simple three by six foot floor space you could bring in an extra hundred bucks a week?"

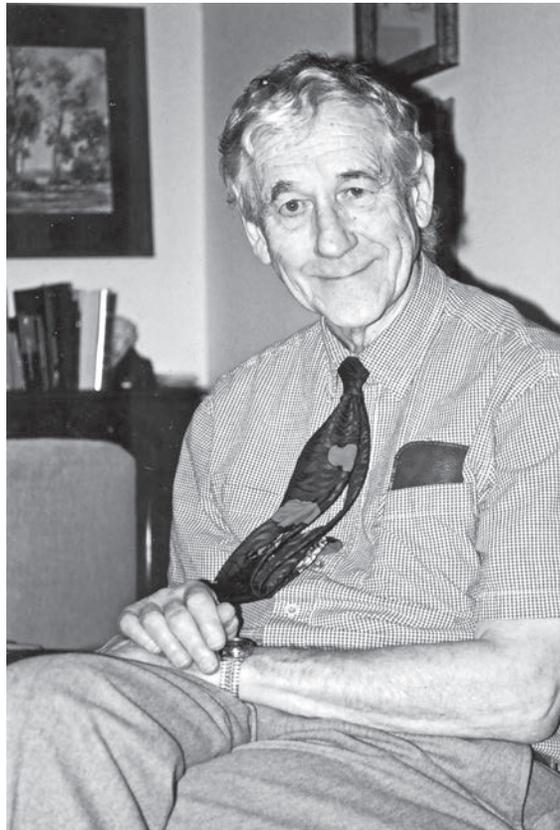
He said, "Tell you what, if you can bring me a machine that is brand new and nobody else has one like it, I'll give it a try."

Jerry and I got in the car and headed for Chicago. A new machine had just hit the market called "Humpty Dumpty." It was the first pinball machine to have flippers.

We went right to the factory, got it off of the assembly line, put it in the trunk and by nine that night, it was up and running at the Golden Gate. The machine was a sensation and two nights later I got a phone call from Kupps at 12:30. "If you want to keep this machine in here, get your butt out here and fix it."

I said, "But Kupps you're going to close in a half hour."

I headed out there and found about ten gamblers waiting for me. I opened the machine



*Jerry Henry*

and it was so full of nickels that the pile spilled and shorted out the fuses.

I dumped the money on the bar, put in new fuses and the machine was up and running. Kupps was all smiles.

As the summer of '47 passed, Jerry and I both felt it was time to move on to better things. We sold "Progressive Amusement Company," to a local electrician, Jim Reddick. Off we went to school, Jerry to Marquette University and I to the American Institute of Specialized Watch Repair in Grand Rapids, Mich., to launch my career in the jewelry business.

After schooling, Jerry's dad set him up in the "economy supply" lumber business. Even their trucks were painted plaid. But Jerry just couldn't let go of his yen for the amusement business. Every tavern had a shuffleboard. Over at Economy Lumber, under Jerry's direction, they started building shuffleboards as a sideline. Instead of the usual hard maple tops, they used Consoweld, a surface that provided less friction for the puck than maple. They sold one to the guy I worked for in Grand Rapids, Mich., where I repaired pinball machines on Saturdays while going to school.

Now we "fast forward" to the "settle down" period of our lives, when we were both married and raising families. Jerry's father had passed away, ending the Frank J. Henry company as we once knew it. I believe Frank's last big job was a government contract to dismantle part of the too-large Badger Ordnance facility near Baraboo where a lot of ammunition was made during World War Two. Jerry dissolved Economy Lumber and went to work as a project manager for Wergin Construction Company in Wausau.

One day, Jerry informed me he bought a pinball machine called "Four Roses." Nothing was said but we both understood that I would keep it working for him. Just about every time

we got together, he laughed and reminded me he had a slip in his billfold that said if something happened to him I was supposed to get Four Roses.

In his later years, Jerry wrote a couple of books of fiction, never published. He also wrote a pamphlet of five hundred dice games that he dreamed up. He was always very concerned about social justice. He took food and "treats" to the needy. He visited nursing homes regularly, invented games for residents and volunteered at the YMCA. He loved jazz music, was an accomplished drummer and loved to read fiction stories.

A few years ago, Jerry said, "You know, I have Alzheimer's, so if I forget something I want to say now and then, you'll know why."

Enter Harry Hamm. Many of you know

Harry, a jovial fellow who loves life and lives it that way. Harry has a mobility problem and gets around on a scooter.

One day I got a call from Harry. He said he had a pinball machine that was acting up. Would I come and fix it?

Harry explained that he found the machine on

the Internet. It was the same machine they used to play at the Friendly Fountain. As we talked, I reminded him of our Golden Gate experience and Humpty Dumpty, the first flipper machine.

A month or so later I got a call from Harry Hamm. He had found a beautiful Humpty Dumpty on the Internet and he had to have it.

A short time later when I was in Wausau, I met Jerry for lunch and told him about the newfound Humpty Dumpty. He lit up like a Christmas tree. I told him the next time he was in the Rapids we'd go out and play it. He was very anxious about that but it was not to be. Jerry's Alzheimer's took a turn for the worse and he would make no more trips to his old hometown.

Jerry sold his home in Wausau and moved into Sylvan Crossing, an assisted living facility



*Harry Hamm*

in Wausau. He even brought Four Roses with him. We played it together, often an hour at a time. At each visit I could see a little more lapse in his memory from the time before. Then it got to the point where it took him a while to know me. We'd play three or four games on the pinball machine. He still played a great game and those flippers responded perfectly to his guiding touch.

When my wife Jane was along one time, he didn't know who she was. I said "Jerry you know Jane, she's my wife."

With a smile he said, "If you say so."

On my next visit, I don't think he knew me, but he had a constant smile and played the pinball a couple of times. Finally his son, Jeff, in Eau Claire, called me and asked if I would join him to visit his dad.

We met in Wausau and at the facility we found Jerry sitting alone at a table with a cup of coffee and a broad smile on his face. I don't believe he knew either one of us. We walked him to his room, fired up the Four Roses and played a few games. Jerry still knew what to do except he could not remember to push the lever each time to bring the next ball up. His scores beat both mine and son Jeff. Jerry was still the pinball champ.

Jerry died peacefully on October 27, 2010, at Sylvan Crossing. True to his wishes, I was given the Four Roses. I accepted it with the assurance that the machine would eventually go to the South Wood County Historical Museum as a tribute to years gone by, and so it will be.

But it wasn't quite time for the machine to be retired, so I asked myself, "What would Jerry want me to do?"

I'm sure he'd like the machine to continue to entertain and I decided to locate it at Harry Hamm's facility in the company of Humpty Dumpty, Wild West (the Friendly Fountain machine), and a beautifully restored Wurlitzer juke box. There, I could play it any time I wished and Harry and his visitors would keep it active. Harry was thrilled with the idea and is committed to the promise of Four Roses retirement at the museum.

## Tilt!



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

NONPROFIT  
ORGANIZATION  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
PERMIT NO. 31



Artifacts, a local history magazine and newsletter for the South Wood County Historical Corp. welcomes contributions of writings and photographs relevant to the greater Wisconsin Rapids area. For a year's subscription and membership send \$20 to the address above. Questions? Contact Lori Brost, Museum Administrator and assistant editor, 715-423-1580. [lori@swch-museum.com](mailto:lori@swch-museum.com)



*Photo by Lawrence Oliver*