

Artifacts

Can it be Vesper?

Lawrence Oliver cover photo shows industrial side of quiet village.

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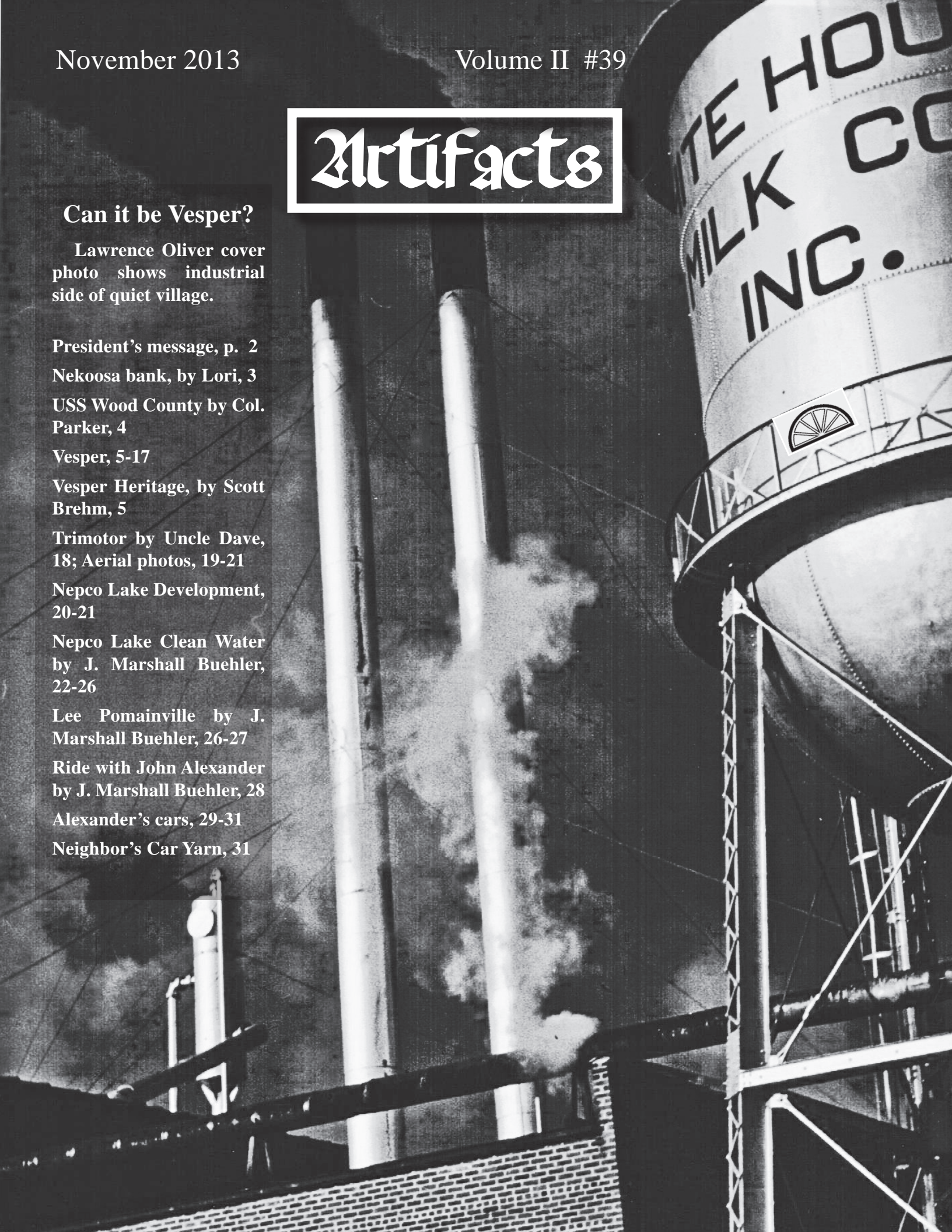


Photo by UD



The Producers: SWCHC President and voice of history Phil Brown wishes videographer Paul Gross a happy, healthy and prosperous 91st year.

Notes on 2013

By Phil Brown, President

With the end of the growing season and winter not far behind, we want to take this opportunity to recognize Micky Erickson, Betty Havlik and all the Master Gardener volunteers for their meticulous work maintaining the beautiful gardens at the Museum. The rebuilding of Locust Street, which borders the north side of our property, posed many challenges this year, but the grounds have never looked better.

As 2013 comes to an end, we mark the passing of two dear friends of the SWCHC.

For Ruth Barker, the South Wood County area had a very special place in her heart as it did for her mother, Emily Baldwin Bell. Many organizations in our community have benefitted from the generosity of these descendants of George Mead I.

We also bid farewell to Ellen Sabetta, asked by Emily Bell to be the first SWCHC curator. In that era and in subsequent decades, Ellen displayed an unequalled affection for and knowledge of her home town. She will be especially missed by *Artifacts* editor, Uncle Dave, who collaborated with Ellen on numerous projects.

On a happier note, in September, we celebrated the 90th birthday of Paul Gross, the indomitable documentarian currently in the process of finishing his 27th local history video, which will be available in time for Christmas.

Not to be forgotten is the two-day 2013 Local History and Historic Preservation Conference at Hotel Mead that drew more than 300 attendees for workshops, networking and presentations (including one by yours truly on... yes, cranberries).

Yes, it was another good year for our historical society and museum and thanks to you, our loyal members, we look forward to 2014 and beyond.

Editor's Notes

Errata: in #38, "Jerry" (p. 23) should be "Harry" Brazener. "Schwartz" (p. 11) is "Swartz."

More Vesper

From *Artifacts* #36: Identified by Walter Heiser via Sylvia Miller at the Print Shop as Pioneer school, corner of Shudy and Town Hall Road, Sigel: Jim Haas, Beverly Mayers (sp. ?), Walter Heiser, David Krommenaker, Herbert Zimet (?), William Heiser.



Forget Me Not

1985: Presenting *River City Memoirs* III in Museum living room, now Natwick exhibit. Sally Engel, left, Ellen Sabetta, right. Photo by Kathy Engel.



Nekoosa State Bank

By Lori Brost

Museum Administrator

The doors opened for business Tuesday, Dec. 16, 1913; but the public had been introduced to the Nekoosa State Bank earlier by carnations at the door and the music of Port Edwards' White City Band. Enthusiastic visitors were greeted by mahogany and brass—and assured that their money was as safe as it would be in Chicago or New York.

Plans for the red brick building at 333 Market St. had been drawn by local architect A.F. Billmeyer. During construction, articles of incorporation were signed March 14, 1913, by Dennis D. Conway, Franklin J. Wood, Guy O. Babcock, and Henry E. Fitch.

On May 8, 1913, officers elected were: Guy O. Babcock, President; Lewis M. Alexander, Vice President; and Herman H. Helke, Cashier, a position he would hold until 1919.

Along with Babcock and Alexander, the following joined the board of directors: James E. Brazeau, Franklin J. Wood, Henry E. Fitch, John P. Nash (distant cousin to current bank president, Robb Nash Sigler), and Frank J. McGarigle.

The group began with a building of their own; \$20,000 in capital stock; and a surplus of \$5,000. Within two weeks, the bank was recording deposits of \$16,311 and in ten years, \$284,104.

Between 1965 and 1966, a new building went up next door at 405 Market Street that allowed for drive thru banking in the 'alley' between the two. The old bank was sold to Great Northern Paper Co. (formerly Nekoosa-Edwards), where they housed their Woodlands office and pay station. The upstairs remained offices for Dr. Hugh Waters and lawyer Henry Fitch.

As the Nekoosa bank grew, a neighboring village recognized a need illustrated by this example:

Marshall Buehler's father, August Buehler, owner of the White City Store in Port Edwards, did business on a charge basis with customers who were paid every Friday. On Thursday, he would go to a bank and borrow \$3,000 to cash

the paychecks and pay off the charge accounts; on Saturday he would pay off his own loan. Then he would do it all over again on the next pay day.

On Dec. 13, 1948, the Nekoosa State Bank became Nekoosa Port Edwards State Bank. The following year, they would open a branch in John Alexander's new shopping center. When additional space was needed, a building with drive-thru banking was erected. In 1977, the bank moved to 240 Market Street.

In 1980, Leroy Sigler became bank president.

Around 1989, the original building was purchased back from Georgia Pacific. An addition was added to connect the two buildings and the drive-thru was moved to the rear of the building. Leroy Sigler remained in charge until 1995 when his son, Robb, took over the position he continues to hold.

With both Nekoosa and Port Edwards locations thriving, the business again branched out, this time to the Rome "Lakes" area with the purchase of the M&I bank building in 1990. In 1996, a new building was erected and the original moved into Nekoosa. It is now the home for Allied Health Nekoosa Branch on Cedar Street.

This year, in honor of the 100th anniversary, board secretary Sarah Sigler (wife to current president Robb) put together a calendar of Nekoosa history, honoring the small locally-owned Nekoosa State Bank, built in 1913, that has grown to a three-branch organization with capital stock of \$26 million.



Original Nekoosa State Bank
Lawyer Fitch and Dr. Waters, second floor

A Ship of Our Own: USS Wood County

By Col. Billy Parker

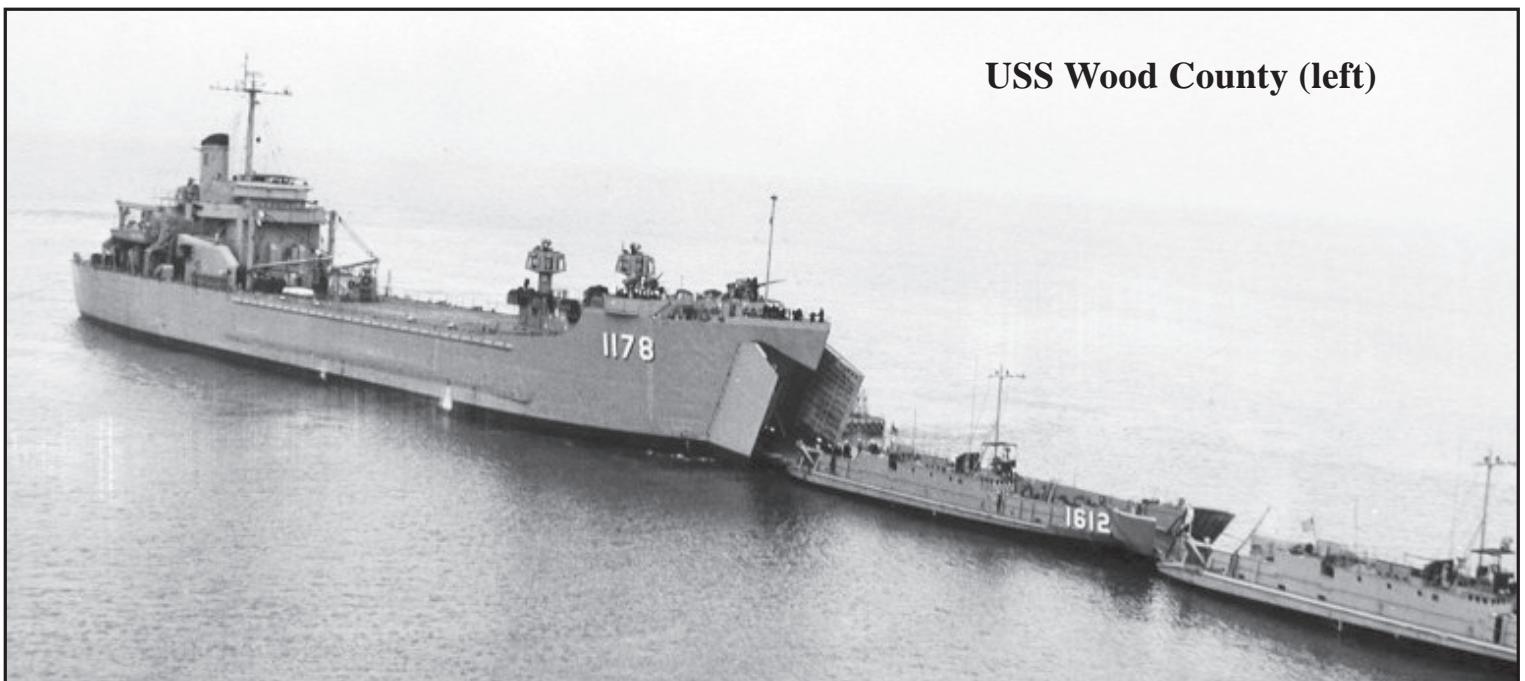
Really? A Navy ship named after our own county? It's partly true. She was named after all four Wood Counties in the United States: in Ohio, Texas, West Virginia and Wisconsin.

Building on the ship started Oct. 1, 1956, in Lorain, Ohio and it was launched Dec. 14, 1957. Landing Ship Tank 1178 USS Wood County was commissioned into the Navy Aug. 5, 1959, in Norfolk, Virginia. Her mission would be to support and ferry troops and supplies for amphibious operations of the Atlantic fleet. USS Wood County could transport 28 tanks and vehicles, 410 officers and enlisted men and four landing craft, sometimes called Higgins boats. Since USS Wood County's mission was that of a giant beach ferry, her only armaments were three twin 50-caliber machine gun mounts.

After her training mission, USS Wood County's first serious operation came as support for the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962, followed by operation Southtrap, a NATO exercise that transported Turkish tanks and troops in early 1963.

Her most famous operation came in 1965 when a coup to reinstate former Dominican Republic president Juan Bosch turned into a civil war and USS Wood County rushed to the Dominican Republic to rescue 415 American nationals. She dropped them off in Puerto Rico and took aboard US Marines for an amphibious operation back in the Dominican Republic after which she took aboard more refugees, transporting them to Puerto Rico. USS Wood County earned the meritorious unit commendation for her role in the Dominican intervention of 1965. She was used as a training and transport ship up through 1971.

In 1972, the USS Wood County was decommissioned and held in the naval reserve fleet till her name was struck from the Naval Vessel Register in 1989. She was scrapped in Brownsville, Texas in 2002, bringing an end to the ship, "USS Wood County."



USS Wood County (left)

A concrete slab by the “new” Vesper dam is etched with the signatures of Walter Halver-son, W.W. Clark and Ray Mancl. Farmer and poli-tician Clark in an Octo-ber 1945 *Daily Tribune* is called instrumental in the construction of small dams along Big Hemlock Creek south of Vesper to restore fish and wildlife and provide recreation. The project was sponsored by the Vesper Commercial Club and associated con-servationists.



Uncle Dave

The Idea of History

By Scott Brehm

My family came to America in 1885 when my great, great grandfather, Reinhold Brehm, came over from Prussia on the steamship, Wieland, with his wife and three children. Reinhold started a 40-acre farm at what is now the intersection of Knuth and St. James Road in the town of Sigel.

Reinhold was a founding member of St. James Lutheran Church and Seneca, Sigel, Rudolph Mutual Insurance Co. Both are still in operation.

A stone mason by trade, he laid the top three feet of stone holding back the Wisconsin River along the east bank in Wisconsin Rapids.

One of Reinhold's five children was my great grandfather, Edward Brehm, who owned a farm on County HH, just outside of Vesper. His son, my grandfather, Carl Brehm, operated a 40-acre farm just outside the Vesper limits on County C and also had a milk route. My father, Don Brehm, was the local Vesper banker for 44 years before retiring

recently. The bank had been in Vesper since 1911 and closed shortly after my dad retired.

I have always loved the idea of history. When I was a kid, my buddy, Steve Livernash, and I would go around metal detecting in Vesper for old stuff. We used to play around in the area by the Vesper School and didn't know what had been there until I was a quite a bit older. If we had only known it was the Vesper Brick and Tile manufacturing company.

This bond between Steve and me continues today as we are partners in Stealth Solutions, a

private investigations company, and we continue digging things up.

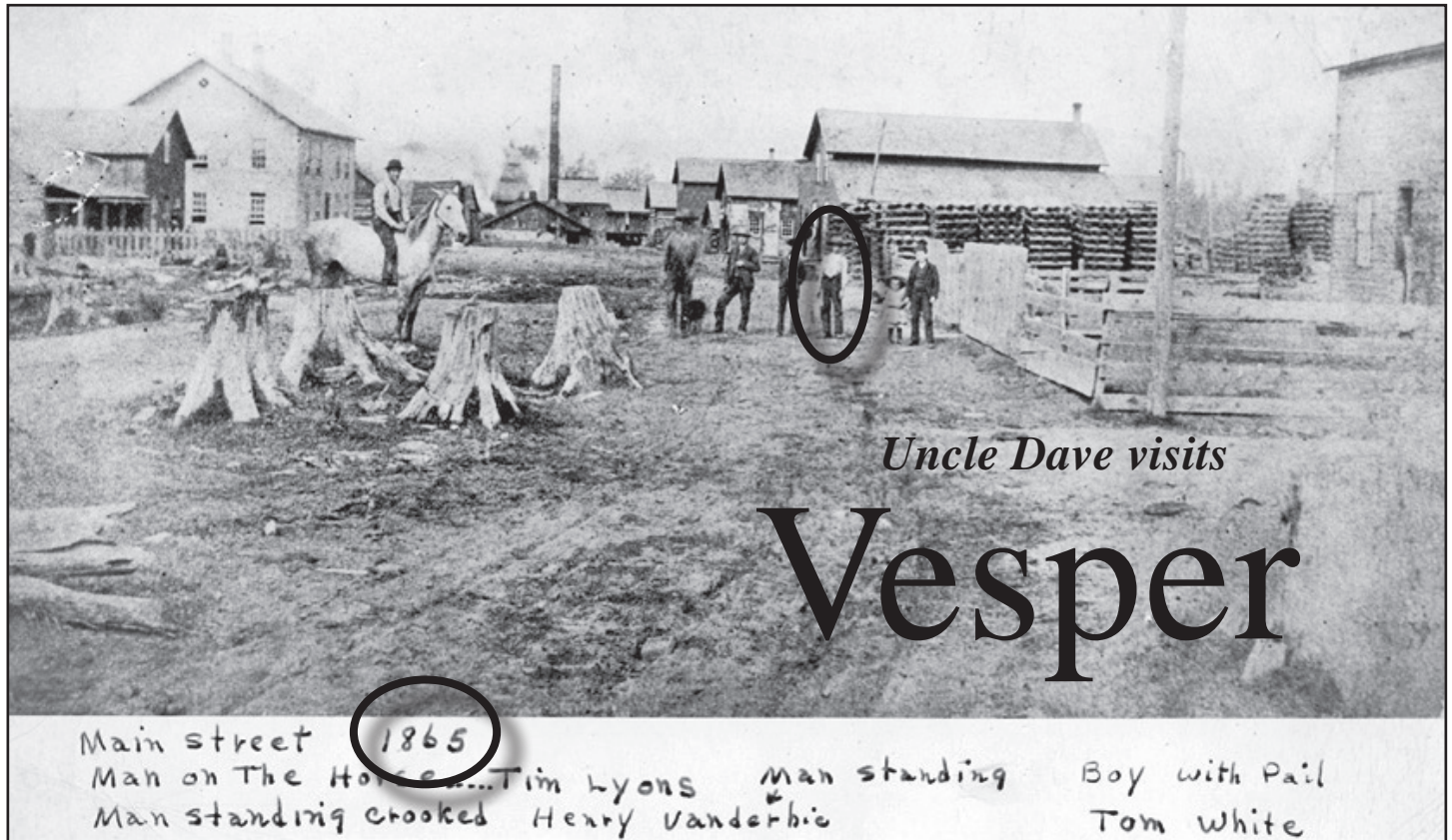
I lived in Vesper for most of my life and recall many buildings no longer there. I have talked to the elders and picked their brains on what they recall from their younger years. What you see here in these pages only scratches the surface.



Scott Brehm at his boyhood home, Seneca Sigel Insurance, Cameron Avenue, Vesper

Below: lumber town on west side of Hemlock Creek. Could it be 1865? “Boy with pail Tom White,” who appears to be about 12, was born in 1873 on a local farm. Tom was the son of Joseph, a Civil War vet originally from Three Rivers, Canada, and Mary, whose parents, Patrick and Mary Hanifin, came to Sigel in 1857 from Massachusetts.

Mary’s family was notably Irish Catholic. Her sisters became Elizabeth Conway, Johanna Doyle, Nellie Johnson and Margaret McCamley. Brother Thomas married Maria Rouhan.



Vesper, the unincorporated village on Hemlock Creek, northwest of Wisconsin Rapids, is still far enough from Wisconsin Rapids and Marshfield to retain its own identity. It was, in mid-20th Century, a quintessential dairy country farm town. Now, like most former agricultural centers, it is mainly a residential community. But, as suggested by the cover photo, even before it went bucolic, Vesper was an active industrial focal point served by three railroads.

What about the name “Vesper?” The story goes that residents suggested “Hardscrabble,” a term too generic and uncomplimentary for an official monicker. When postmaster James Cameron called for a more suitable term, it is said that “a little girl” proffered “Vesper” and so it was.

Unfortunately, “Vesper” has no obvious relevance beyond suggesting the “vespers” or

prayers ending the Catholic day. The planet Venus is sometimes called Vesper because it appears in the evening. There are also “vesper” sparrows, mice and bats—and other Vesper towns in New York, Kansas and Saskatchewan.



West Side, July 24, 1898, four years after fire

Boom Town on the Hemlock

Rebuilding on the East Side
July 24, 1898

C.R. Goldsworthy

VESPER'S PRIDE

In the late 1800s came the influx of German, Bohemian, Polish and Scandinavian farmers we now associate with northern Wood county; but the founders were English, Irish, Scotch and French-Canadian. "Girard and Drake" financed the sawmill on the bank of the Hemlock Creek at what became the village of Vesper.

Credit for cutting the first trees goes to Joseph White, a Canuck who had come in 1865 to work for Clark and Scott of Rudolph. He arrived at Vesper in 1874.

Girard and Drake sold to John and William Whorton, brothers, lumbermen, papermakers and bankers from New Brunswick, Canada, whose foreman was James W. Cameron, of Appleton. After a few years, Cameron, with Henry Sherry, Neenah, and George Gerry, Appleton, bought out

Whortons and operated the mill until 1894 when the forest fires that had been running through the region for weeks hit Vesper.

"The thriving little town is all but wiped out," declared the Sept. 1, 1894, *Centralia Enterprise*. "The sawmill, planing mill, lumber in the yards and about 25 dwelling houses, in fact all of the town west of the Hemlock was totally wiped out by the fire."

Though smaller sawmills continued to operate, the big pinery days were over. The Cameron group sold their property to the Milwaukee real estate firm of Edward A. Benson and Charles E. Anderton. The purchase included about 11,000 acres and the 100-acre site of the village, later traded to Clifford R. Goldsworthy for Racine area property.

Goldsworthy was left with the stump-filled town site he continued to market.

The man with the best claim to the title of "Mr. Vesper," Goldsworthy was born in 1865 on a Racine county farm, graduated from Union Grove high school and studied business at Spencerian College, Milwaukee, in 1886. At age 21, he took over the family farm. In 1893, he went into the real estate business in Union Grove.

At Vesper, Goldsworthy built a small sawmill, opened a general store, became postmaster, sold real estate and ran a farm. He built the Monogram Hotel and leased it.

Not a member of a denomination, he helped support the First Congregational Church and gave land for the Catholic, Dutch Reformed, and Evangelical Lutheran congregations.

Goldsworthy, a conventional Republican, was chairman of the town board of Hansen, a member of the Wood County board and member of the State Assembly 1905-07. He died in Vesper in 1946.

Another local firm was the

Vesper Wood Manufacturing Co., organized in 1909 to produce stave silos, stock watering tanks and other articles of wood. In 1917, it was sold to D.E. Woodruff, becoming Vesper Tank and Silo Co. and later, Woodruff Lumber Co.

The first blacksmith shop was set up by the Sherry Cameron lumber company in November 1901. That building still stands and is part of Woodruff's.

A button factory, employing four men, was established in June 1910. There was also a pickle plant.

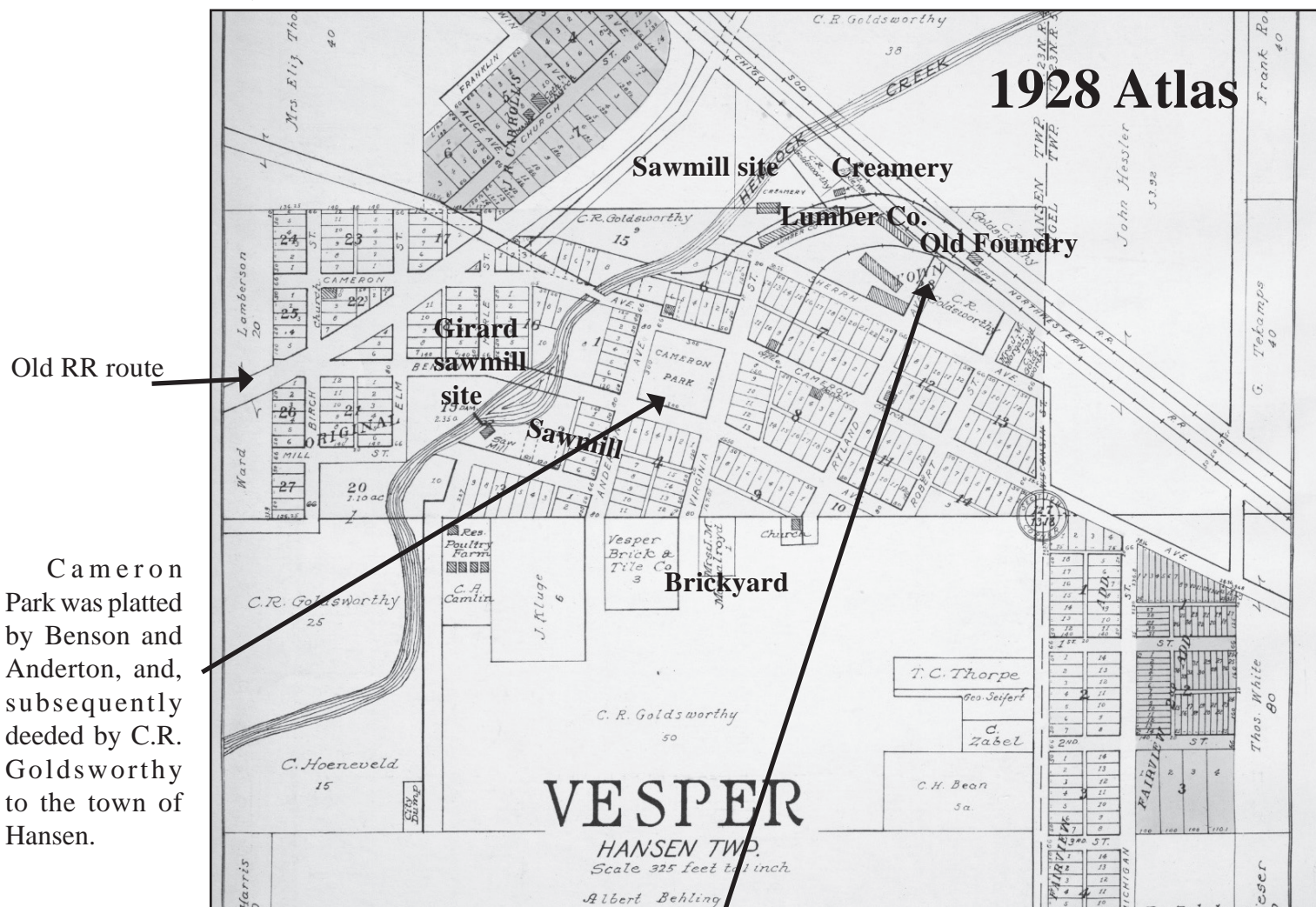
Among the downtown businesses were a hardware store, meat market, barber shop, ice cream parlor and roller skating rink.



Lutheran church



Clevis and Malleable Iron



Typical dwelling of Murgatroyd's "Vesper brick," with a similar structure next door in the older photo



Thens and Nows

"Now" photos and most "Then" photos provided by Scott Brehm. Others are from McMillan Memorial Library, SW-CHC and River City Memoirs.



Trickey printing

Trinity Lutheran

Horn Hardware

Later Irene's bar

STREET SCENE VESPER WIS.



Hotels included the Vesper Hotel, razed in 1923, and the Monogram Hotel, shown here, built by Goldsworthy, though operated by others. It was destroyed by fire in the 1920s. The main floor of this hotel still exists as shown above.



Horn Hardware

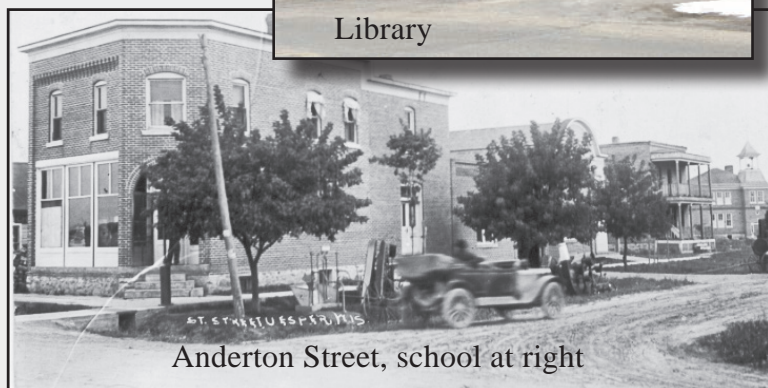


Library

Woodruff lumber



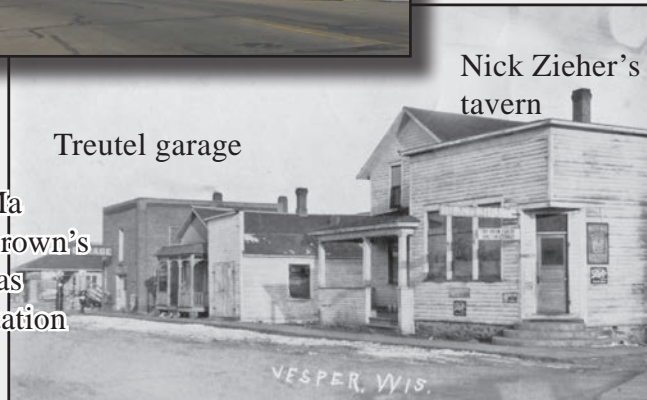
Jo Jo's, 2013



Anderton Street, school at right

Treutel garage

Ma Brown's gas station



Nick Zieher's tavern

Irene's bar



"How do you like me now"

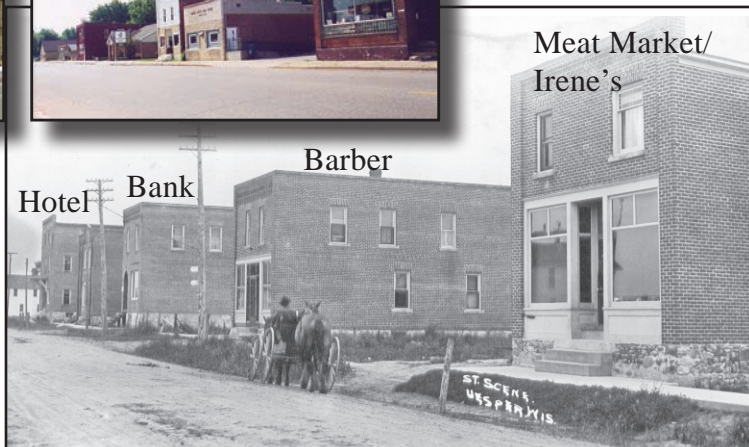


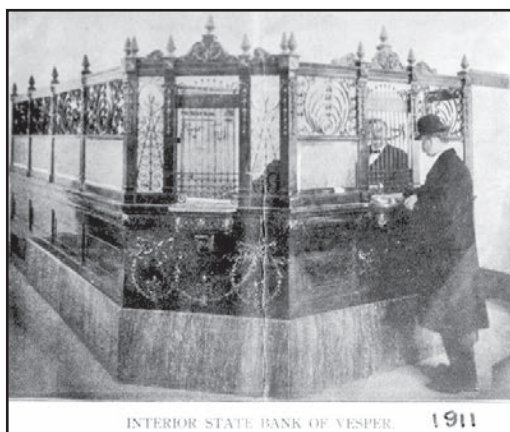
2013: Post office, center



Meat Market/ Irene's

Hotel Bank Barber





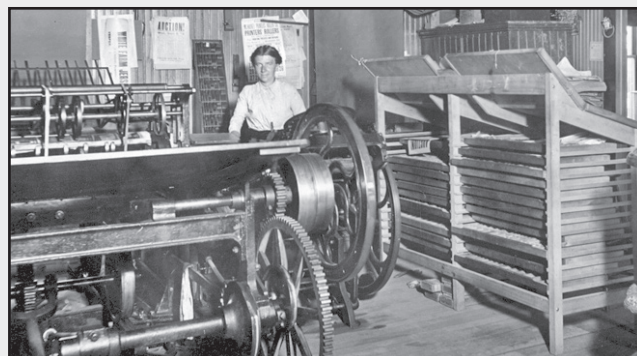
INTERIOR STATE BANK OF VESPER 1911

Owen Oliver, father of photographer Lawrence, with George E. Martin established the Vesper State Bank in 1911 with capital of \$10,000. President was Martin; vice-president, Oliver; cashier, Burton Jones, the trio presumably pictured at right.

Replaced by new bank building



Vesper's first newspaper, the *Pioneer*, shown at left, an eight-page weekly, published its first issue on July 14, 1910. A second newspaper, the *State Center*, was established in 1911.



Below: Goldsworthy general store. Printing office held Vesper's first newspaper, the *Pioneer*, beginning 1910. The *State Center*, was established in 1911. C.R. Goldsworthy, third from horse.



Age of Industry



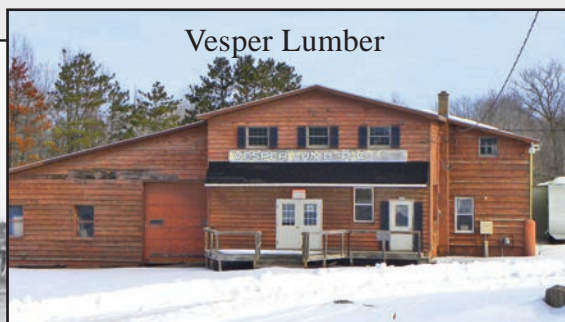
Vesper Safety Clevis and Malleable Iron Co. was built in 1908 by C. R. Goldsworthy, John N. Hayes, Oshkosh, L. H. Bartholomew, Milwaukee, and F. W. Darling, Wautoma, to make devices for iron manufacturing. It closed after 11 months because of the cost of shipping. The facility was later used as a machine shop and auto garage.



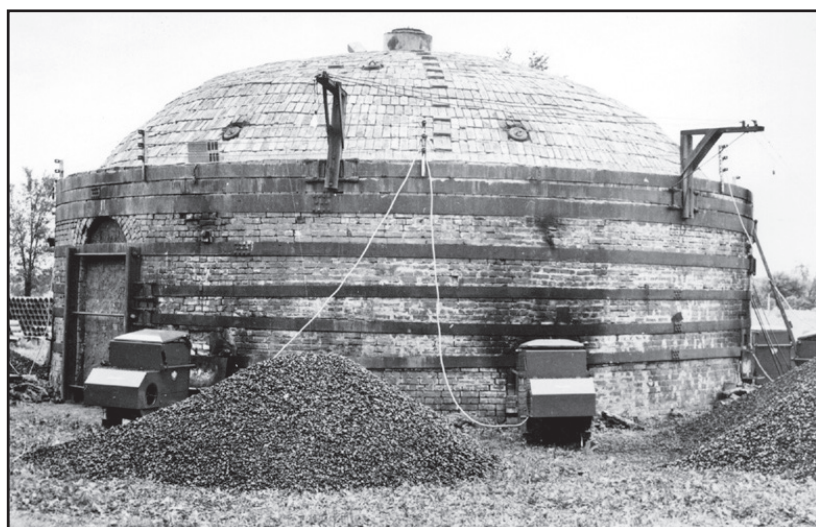
Equitable Creamery Company, a farmers cooperative, was started in 1907 on land granted to the company by C.R. Goldsworthy for \$1. It operated as a creamery and cheese factory until 1921 and later as the American Milk Products Co., the White House Milk Co. of Manitowoc, and Western Condensing Co.

In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the plant made the base material for penicillin. In 1951, Frank Gill purchased the factory for a wall paper business.

The old creamery building is now within Vesper Lumber Co. Sanna Dairies bought the creamery business and built a new plant, now owned by Kerry Ingredients, Inc., Beloit and Ireland.



Less dramatic version of cover photo



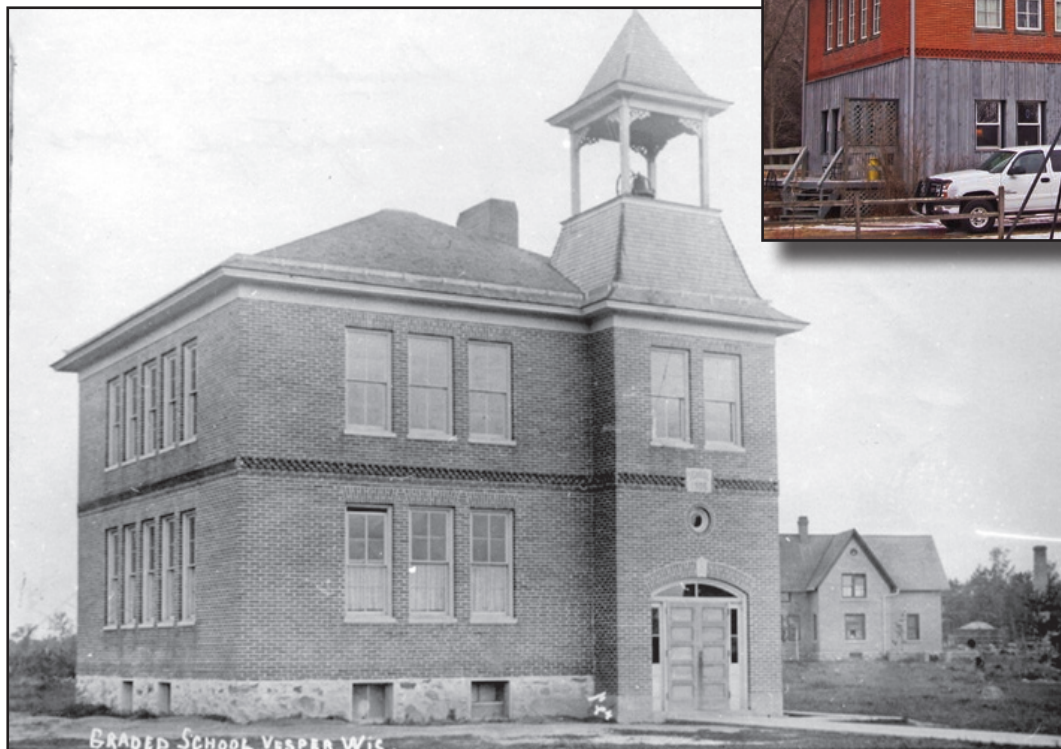
Vesper Brick and Tile was established by John Murgatroyd and Sons about 1902 near what is now the former school building. Capacity in 1911 was 25,000 bricks per day and 8,000 tiles. Almost all the bricks used in Vesper prior to the late 1920s were produced here. Reddish-brown "Vesper brick" can still be recognized in many area landmarks.



Looking west
toward
Hemlock Creek



The first Vesper school was moved from the fire-ravaged West Side to the east village, near the Sigel town line . The second building was the brick, two-story structure with basement and belfry (below) that was remodeled into apartments in 1956 and is now a residence.



School and
house behind
it are sheathed
in Murgatroyd
brick.

Finhelt Hotel, below,
same as
previous page,
below and
alternate view, right



Looking east from Hemlock Creek. Hotel was razed in 1923.

Later: Newer church in same location? Two gas stations. 1920s automobile. New brick building. Mature vegetation in Cameron park, right.







Honey 4 Sale

Photo by Lawrence Oliver, Vesper



As Uncle Dave was preparing to board the Ford Trimotor at Alexander Field on Sept. 2, 2013, he met NEPCO historian Marshall and wife Pat Buehler disembarking from the storied aircraft that offered \$75 rides as a fund raiser for its owner, the Experimental Aviation Association, Oshkosh.

For Uncle, it was an occasion for nostalgia as he visited the airport that had been his boyhood playground in the 1950s when it was an abandoned WWII prisoner of war camp.

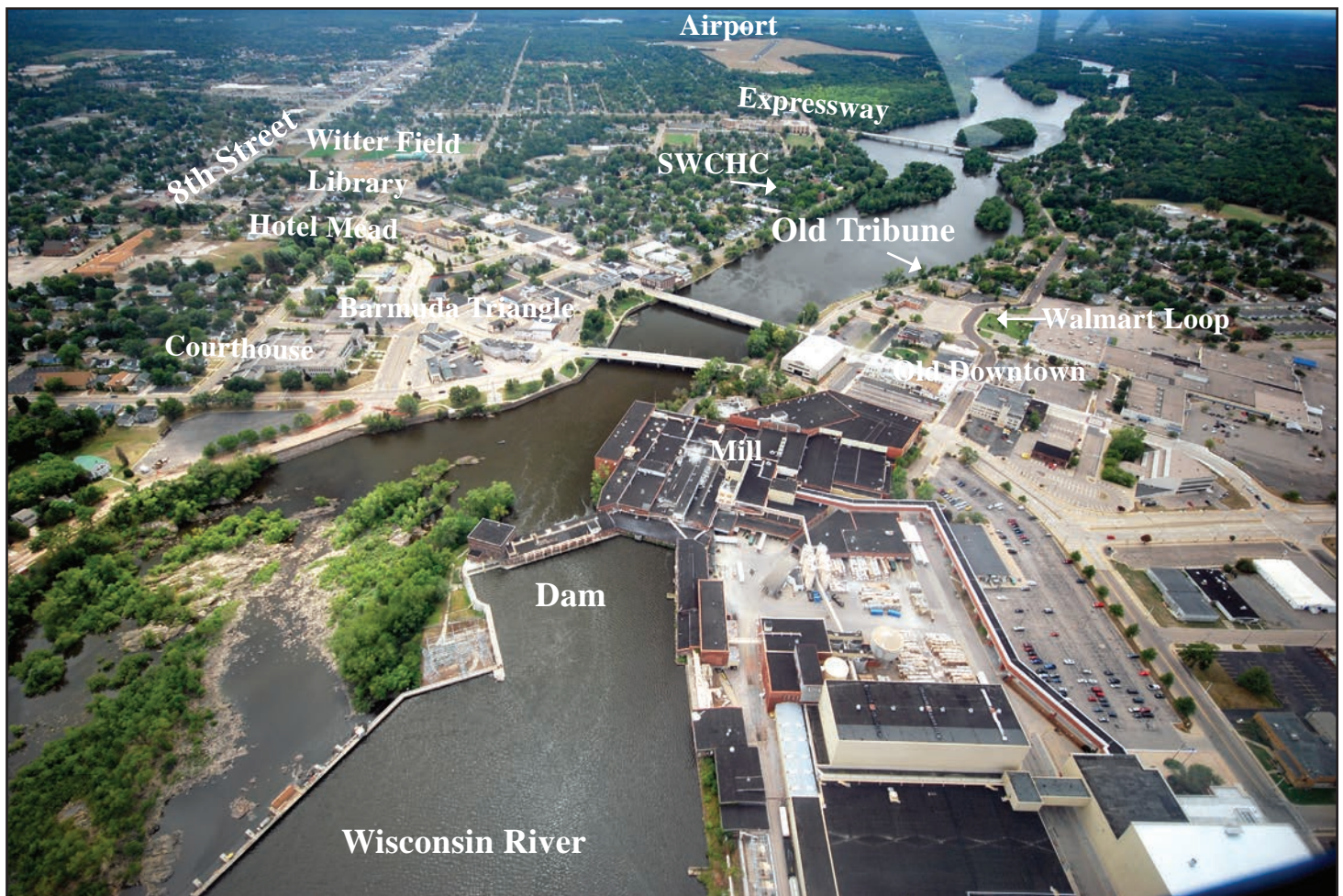


Buehler: The uniting of two loves. John Alexander's Packard alongside the Ford Trimotor plane.



Photos by Uncle Dave





Lots For Sale

Tranquil Canadian Lake in Central Wisconsin

Or so the promoters of the Nepco Lake shoreline say on their website, offering “baby boomers” boating, skiing, fishing, sailing and canoeing on 500 acres of “pristine water surrounded by gigantic white pines.” Just 11 houses on the entire lake as of 2010!

According to Pavloski Development, NEPCO Lake was built in the 1920s by Nekoosa Edwards Paper Co. (NEPCO) to provide clean water for making paper. Consequently, most of the lake residents were descendants of the founders of NEPCO. In the last 50 years, it is noted, fewer than five properties on NEPCO have changed hands.

“NEPCO Lake is wedged in between two championship golf courses (The Ridges and Bull’s Eye Country Club), the Wisconsin River, and a small local airport. The reputations of the lake and Bull’s Eye Country Club are legendary in the paper industry where each week for 65 years paper salesmen from NEPCO entertained their best clients from around the world.”

- Just south of Wisconsin Rapids and extensive restaurants, stores, entertainment, and a world-class hospital.

- 3.5 hours from Chicago, 2.5 hours from Milwaukee, 1.5 hours from Madison

NEPCO Lake

A Need for Clean Water

By J. Marshall Buehler

A lot of attention is being given this summer to that 400-plus acre pond of water just south of Wisconsin Rapids, named NEPCO Lake for the initials of Nekoosa Edwards Paper Company.

It started with, "The river is too dirty."

That's what lake builder and Nekoosa Edwards Paper Co. manager John Alexander told his father, president of the company, and the directors. You can't get a white shirt clean using dirty water. Likewise, you can't make a clean, white sheet of fine paper using dirty river water.

The mill was embarking on a program of producing higher grades of paper.

Whereas most man-made reservoirs are built with the intent of generating hydro-electric power, John had to sell his father and the board on the idea that they should spend \$350,000 to build a lake to supply clean process water.

The board agreed with the recommendation and, in 1925, the project was underway. Land had to be acquired and cleared, dikes built, a highway bridge built, and a pipeline laid to the Port Edwards mill.

Three men were assigned to the project. Clarence Watson was the surveyor and civil engineer, while Frank Coldwell was the person in charge of building the pumping station and pipeline. Ed Gleason was the overall project supervisor, reporting to Alexander.

The engineers on the project already had in mind the source of their water supply. Two streams, the Four Mile/Buena Vista and Bloody Run creeks merged just east of the Highway 13 bridge and meandered through a natural valley before emptying into the river about a mile and a quarter downstream. By damming the creek at its mouth, a lake could be impounded that would provide up to forty million gallons of water a day, an amount that would satisfy the city of St. Paul, Minn., at that time.

To accomplish this, work went on day and, by floodlight, night, with the aid of a steam

shovel, horse-drawn wagons and a large crew of men. Several Native Americans, out of work after the cranberry harvest, set up a camp on a promontory overlooking the river and a kitchen/dining room was built near the dam site. A large barn was built just west of



Four Mile (a.k.a. Buena Vista) Creek prior to flooding to create Nepco Lake

the lake. The project even warranted its own blacksmith.

Work began September 1925 in order to complete the dikes and dam so that the spring runoff from the Buena Vista marsh area in Portage County could be retained in the new lake.

A 200-foot dike at the west end of the lake, with a two-gate dam, and a pumping station, was built at the dam site. It housed pumps, water screens and an electric generator. Excess water would be put through a hydro electric unit to produce electricity which would be used for powering the pumps.



The next phase of the project was to build several acres of settling basins and an adjacent chemical treatment building on one of the basin dikes. Water would enter the settling basins through the intake building where alum would be added. The alum produced a gelatinous floc that would settle out in the basins, entrapping suspended dirt and taking it to the bottom. Clear water was skimmed off the surface. A small narrow-gauge railroad was installed on the dike to haul the sacks of alum from the highway to the intake building.

The last major part of the project was to build a 30-inch, cast iron pipeline from the pumping station to the Port Edwards mill, a distance of 3,750 feet.

The pipeline presented two challenges. First, the pipe had to get across the river. This was accomplished during the winter months in three steps. In each case, a portion of the river was isolated by the use of temporary coffer dams. Next, the pipe was laid in an excavation in the river bed, and then covered over with dirt. Then the coffer dam was removed and the entire procedure repeated on the next third of the river.

Another complication arose when the pipeline came ashore on an island just east of the mill. A large marsh and swamp had to be crossed by driving pilings the diameter of a telephone pole down to bedrock, suspending the pipe on the pilings and covering with dirt.

Although there was not yet a lake, in February 1926, the first water was sent through the pipeline to Port Edwards from two large-capacity pumps mounted on a barge and moored at the mouth of the creek.

In order to make the lake more than an industrial water supply, Nekoosa-Edwards took steps to make the lake people friendly. Fishing was

promoted by working with the Wisconsin Conservation Dept. to build a trout hatchery below the west end dike. An employee's recreation area with a public beach was developed near the Highway 13 bridge. Finally, to maintain the pristine quality of the water, algae and weed control was performed two to three times a summer, using sodium arsenate, carbon disulfide and copper sulfate, some pretty harsh chemicals!

In 1929, four years after the lake was built, the Wisconsin Railroad Commission, which had jurisdiction over dams, brought charges against Nekoosa Edwards Paper Co., alleging that the creek had been dammed without first obtaining a state permit.

NEPCO contended that they owned the property under the water as well as the shoreline; the dam was at the mouth of the creek, and all the flow would be returned to the river after use.

The commission agreed to grant a permit after the fact but with a clause that, after thirty years, the lake would revert to the State of Wisconsin. NEPCO objected, claiming that their financial loss would be \$700,000 if the dam were removed, based on the purchase of land, clearing land, building

dikes and dam and pipeline as well as the harm to shoreline property development that had taken place.

The case was ruled in favor of the Railroad Commission in the State Court but NEPCO appealed and it went to the United States Supreme Court. The Court ruled that the dam could remain but that, since it was a navigable stream, the dam owners would have to provide transportation around their dam for any logs or water craft coming down stream. It seems Barker's sawmill, destroyed in an 1872 tornado, had floated logs to their mill at the mouth of the creek.



*Pipeline to Port Edwards as it crossed the island swamp.
Note white capped pilings and pile driver in background.*



A popular Sunday outing at the construction site



Photos from J. Marshall Buehler, Alexander House

In 1930, the company decided to supply, in addition to the Port Edwards facility, the Nekoosa plant with lake water and accordingly, a 40-inch pipeline was extended to that mill. The distance was 3.6 miles and the conduit was reinforced concrete instead of cast iron. The pipes were constructed in Nekoosa and trucked to the pipe way.

Again, it was necessary to cross the river by burying the pipe in the base of the Nekoosa dam. Each mill provided a final step of filtration through powdered-coal filter beds before using it for process water.

A major catastrophe struck in 1948.

The settling basins had been drained in order that the settled sludge might be removed. The 16- x 35- foot, brick intake building acted as a stopper between the lake and settling basin.

There was an 18-foot difference in the lake level and the bottom of the basins. The building could not hold back the pressure of the lake water and toppled over onto its side into the basin, completely submerged except for the wooden roof which floated to the surface.

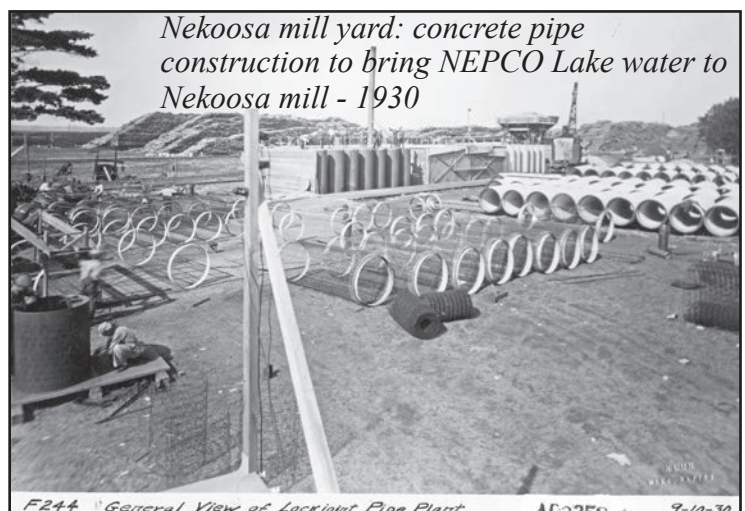
Several men were in the building just prior to the episode, waiting for a professional diver to arrive from Wausau to inspect the foundation of the building. Fortunately, the diver had a flat tire on his way here and was delayed.

The men in the basement of the building heard a window break above them and someone yelled, "Get out of here!"

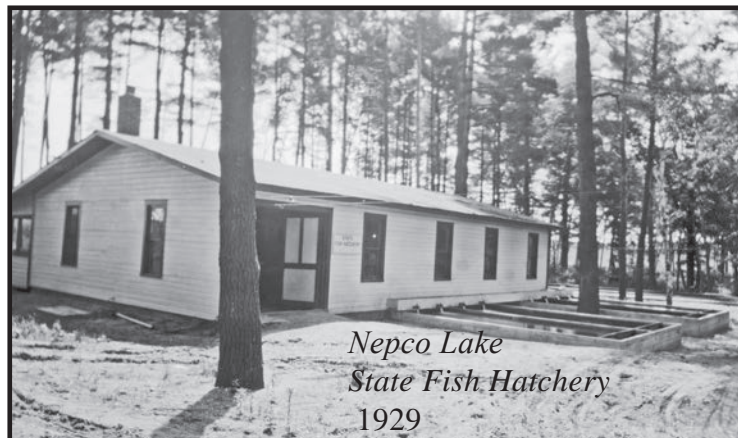
They reached the safety of the dike to witness the capsizing of the building. Had not they heard the window break, they might have been victims of the deluge of water.



1925: settling basins and intake building



Nekoosa mill yard: concrete pipe construction to bring NEPCO Lake water to Nekoosa mill - 1930



The basins filled with water in minutes and spilled over the dikes. The two gates of the dam were immediately opened to lower the lake level. Men worked around the clock to fill in the breach, this time using trucks and the narrow gauge train rather than horses and wagons.

In 1949, the capacity of the lake was increased by adding one-and-a-half feet of water to the surface level of the lake. This meant extensive shoreline work and a new bridge. The lake was temporarily lowered and a barge ferried a small bulldozer out to several small islands that dotted the lake. A crane on the barge lifted the dozer off

the barge, placed it on the island where it leveled off the protrusions.

If the supply of wood were terminated at the mill, there would be sufficient pulpwood in the yards to last several weeks if not months. But if the supply of water were to be interrupted, the mill would be forced to shut down in about three minutes. NEPCO Lake has never let that happen.

Much of the shoreline land has recently been sold to a developer who has subdivided it into building lots. Perhaps this story will enlighten out of town lot buyers as to the background of their new homestead.



Contemporary view of the settling basins

*River City Memoirs*

Nepco Lake? John E. Alexander, center, with NEPCO associates, 1945. Below: J. Marshall Buehler, Gretchen Buehler and Leland Pomainville, enjoying “Doc Lee’s” favorite pastimes

*Buehler*

Doc Lee's Historical Marker Crusade

By J. Marshall Buehler

Doctor Leland C. Pomainville, better known to local people as “Doc Lee” (there were three other Doctor Pomainvilles in the area) had a passion for preserving local history. He served as a founder and president of the South Wood County Historical Corp., first president of the Wisconsin Council for local History, official Historian for the Wisconsin State Medical Society and a popular speaker for schools and local groups.

One of the ways of preserving local history was to erect a historical plaque to commemorate an event, person or site. Toward this goal, Doc personally financed the purchase of six local markers that dot Wood County and two additional outside the boundaries of the county.

The other two markers in Wood County were paid for by other organizations. The cranberry marker west of Port Edwards was paid for by the Cranberry Growers Association and the Centralia Paper Mill marker was purchased by Nekoosa Papers Inc.

Lee's markers are:

- Passenger Pigeon — Babcock
- Doctor Robinson — Robinson Park
- Wakely House — South of Nekoosa
- Strangler Lewis — Nekoosa
- Point Basse — Nekoosa
- Grand Rapids — Wisconsin Rapids
- Doctor Ochner — Baraboo
- Pomainville Medical Room — Prairie du Chien

I was the author of nine of the texts on these markers, including all eight of the Doc Lee markers. Lee would ask me if I could prepare the text for a certain marker.

My answer was always, “Hell yes, Lee. I can write them as long as you pay for them.” His reply was, “Just don't tell Mother how much they cost.” Mother was his wife, Margaret.

We did work out a deal whereby the markers were purchased and paid for by the historical society and then Doc Lee would make a monetary contribution to the group to cover the amount of the invoice, thereby making it a tax deductible contribution on his tax return.

None of Lee's markers are official Wisconsin Historical Society markers. To qualify for that status, the subject must be reviewed and approved by a committee in Madison. Official markers have a “Bucky Badger” logo cast on top of the sign, whereas the markers that Lee was buying had just a straight border across the top.

The cast metal markers are made of aluminum with raised cast lettering. Aluminum is less costly than bronze and less attractive to thieves who might remove a bronze sign and sell it for its scrap value. They are in two sizes and are patterned after the state markers.

The Point Basse marker, located in

Nekoosa's Riverside Park, caused some dissension with the Wakely House owners at the time. They claimed that Point Basse was really where the Wakely House was located and Lee's sign was placed about a mile up river from the true site.

After several letters and some uncomplimentary dialogues, the issue was resolved. Lee appeased the unhappy parties by erecting another marker, although not as large a one, at the entrance to the Wakely House driveway. Thus Lee had kept peace with Colonel Otto and his wife.

If Doc Lee had lived longer, I do think there would have been a couple more markers in the area as he mentioned that the circus train wreck in Babcock and the Native American council circle west of Wisconsin Rapids deserved recognition.

Thanks, Lee, for keeping local history alive.



Grand Rapids marker, Wisconsin Rapids



Take a ride with John

By J. Marshall Buehler

John Alexander, a former president of Nekoosa Edwards Paper Co., was an aficionado of autos and airplanes. He was responsible for Alexander Field being developed, the purchase of a Ford Trimotor airplane in 1929, establishing a local flying school and the securing of a naval pilots' license. He even considered building his own airplane at one point in his youth.

John's love for cars was probably inherited from his father, Lewis, who lost five cars in a 1929 garage fire. These were not just little old Fords or Chevs, but included a Rolls Royce, Lincoln, Cadillac, Buick and Pierce Arrow.

John did find time to build his own car during his younger years. It utilized a chain drive for propulsion. He told the writer, "It didn't have much speed but it could dig itself out of any mud hole."

He enjoyed driving his father's Pierce Arrow until it was given to the village of Port Edwards to be converted into a fire truck for its fledgling fire department.

John's interest in cars turned toward an inventive scheme when he decided to fund the idea of a Port Edwards mill worker and together they formed the Alger Manufacturing Co.

I asked John what the company was all about and he replied, "Oh forget that. It wasn't anything."

Upon further prompting, he told me that a fellow by the name of Rogers, who worked in the machine shop of the Port Edwards mill, had an idea for a contraption that was fitted to an early Ford car motor. Its purpose was to heat the manifold of the engine in cold weather, thereby facilitating a quick and easy start of the engine. From an ordinary oil can, the motorist squirted a small amount of gasoline into the heater and ignited it with a match.

John went on to say, "We made four or five of the things and set fire to about the same number of cars." Dissolution of the partnership followed.

The 1953 Cadillac Eldorado was advertised as the "Most Exciting Car Ever Built" and it was probably John's most luxurious car. The name

"Eldorado" means "The Gilded One." The base price was \$7,750. Dwight Eisenhower selected a white Eldorado to ride in at his inauguration parade.

In spite of the glamour of the Eldorado, it was not magnificent enough as it came from the factory. John, a pilot in his earlier years, visualized some aircraft features in his personalized convertible car. Accordingly, he enlisted the help of a Cadillac test engineer to make his car the fastest thing on the road.

Frank Brunell, the engineer, increased the V-8 engine horsepower about forty percent by installing twin carburetors and then adding a diesel engine super charger.

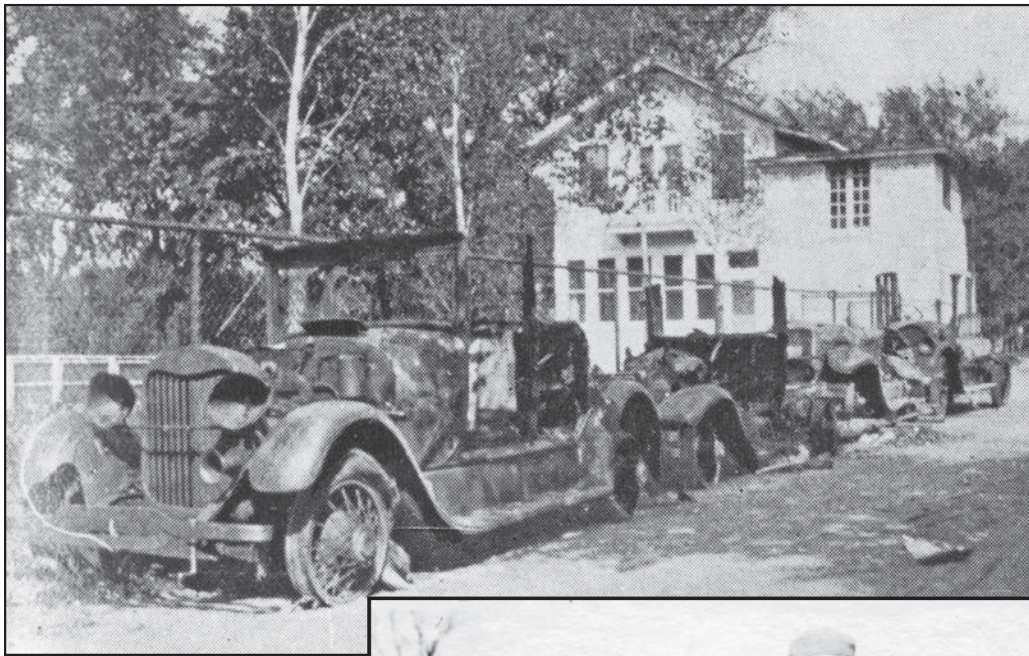
Because John wanted people to know he was coming, the exhaust system was modified so that the exhausts exited the engine via tubes at the front of the car, rather than behind the car. A bypass valve enabled the exhaust flow to the conventional rear exhausts.

The dashboard was customized to include several Stewart Warner gauges, such as an engine hour timer, found only in aircraft. Finally, a silver plaque in the center of the dash showed that the car was specifically customized for John Alexander.

Jack O'Day's auto body shop in Wisconsin Rapids redesigned the hood and front fenders to accommodate the new exhaust tubes and port holes in the chassis.

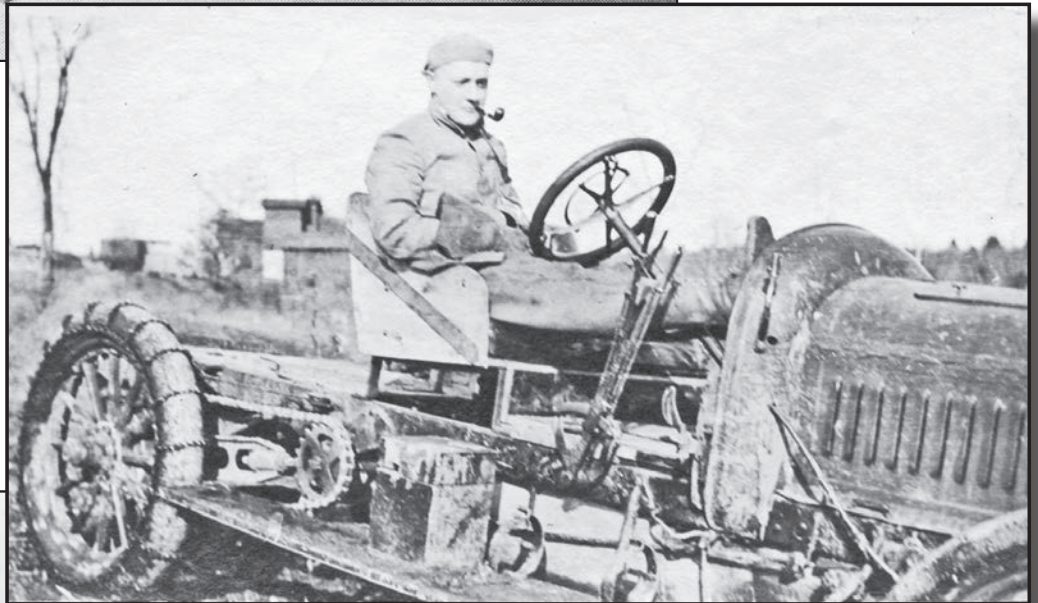
The car was sold after John died and then underwent a restoration in the 1990s. It ended up in a private museum collection. In a 2010 auction, the car sold for \$385,000, a handsome return on the investment had the family held onto the car.

It is reputed among John's close friends that in the 1960s, Chrysler Motor Company was developing a turbine-driven auto. They were going to build fifty of the cars as experimental models. John was in line to get one of the trial cars, but due to his death about that time, the special developmental car never occupied his garage in Port Edwards.



Four of the five automobiles destroyed in Lewis Alexander's garage fire.

John Alexander ready for a muddy ride in his own home-built car, 1915



John and Dorothy Alexander with their 1959 "Letter Series" Chrysler 300E.

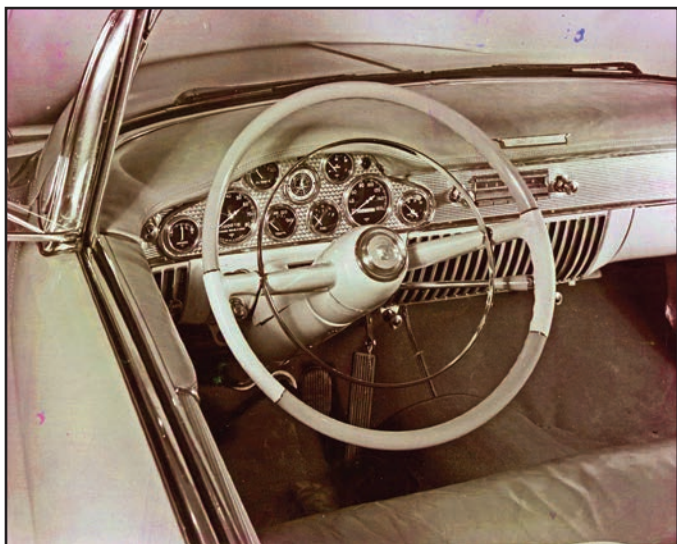
The "bankers hot rod" had a 413 cubic inch V-8 engine, power steering and brakes, swivel bucket seats, push button TorqueFlite automatic transmission and a leather interior.

In the background is the NEPCO Beechcraft Twin Bonanza aircraft.



John Alexander's 1953 Cadillac Eldorado has an online presence. The Milton Robson Collection website in 2010 described in detail the vehicle, which it said was sold for \$385,000. Custom built for Alexander by Cadillac test engineer Frank Burrell, the Eldorado sported a 300-horsepower 331-cubic inch overhead-valve V-8 engine, Hydra-Matic transmission, Borrani wire wheels, custom-made hood, cowl, doors and body shell, hydraulic convertible top and the company's first wraparound windshield. The website credited Pete Marsh at John O'day's Wisconsin Rapids body shop for much of the work.

Inside, the standard gauge cluster was replaced with aircraft-style Stewart Warner instruments and a plaque in the center of the dash featured the signature of John E. Alexander.





Young Neighbor's Car Yarn

Story found online:

"My next door neighbor was a car nut. Growing up in the 50s next to him was quite a thrill, watching what he would put in his seven car drive through L-shaped garage next. He ordered a custom made 1953 robins egg blue Cadillac Eldorado convertible directly from the factory. It was supercharged with big a** pipes coming out the side of the hood, seat belts [!], crash helmets with "Jack" on one and his wife "Dot" on the other, and it had a multi-buttoned dash attachment that when activated made several different tunes, horns, whistles [your choice], and to a nine year old, that seemed really important.

"Anyway he tires of it and gives it to a tech school out in Oregon someplace...for a tax deduction! Out of sight, out of mind, until my sophomore year in college in Eau Claire, Wis. [1965], I visit a car museum in Chippewa Falls and there she sits, right down to the dash plaque, 'Custom made for John E. Alexander.'

"p.s. He bought a new 300SL Gullwing in my sophomore year of high school and paid all of \$12,500 for it...pretty steep for 1958."

The usual reliable sources say the Mercedes 300SL was best known for its gull wing doors, first-ever consumer fuel-injection, and world's fastest top speed. The gull wing version was available from 1955 to 1957, the roadster from 1957 to 1963. Shown here with owner Alexander.



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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



Powers Bluff? Lawrence Oliver photo