

South Wood County Historical Scavenger Hunt

Discovering the Stories Behind the Sites

Thank you for participating in the South Wood County Historical Scavenger Hunt!

Throughout this adventure, participants explored historic places, landmarks, and stories that help tell the history of our communities. From the industries that shaped the region to the people, places, and natural features that make Wood County unique, each stop offers a glimpse into the past.

This guide provides additional historical background on each scavenger hunt location. Whether you discovered these sites firsthand or are learning about them for the first time, we hope these stories inspire a deeper appreciation for the history that surrounds us every day.

Thank you for helping us celebrate and preserve the stories of South Wood County!

1. Grand Rapids of the Wisconsin River

Long before the city was founded, the Ho-Chunk people called this stretch of the Wisconsin River "Ahdawagam," meaning "the two-sided rapids." Early lumbermen later named it the Grand Rapids, recognizing it as one of the river's most powerful and dangerous stretches, made even more hazardous by the infamous Sherman Rock.

In 1838, entrepreneurs Daniel Whitney Bloomer, Alanson Sampson, and Harrison Strong harnessed the river's waterpower to build one of the area's first sawmills. The abundant waterpower attracted additional mills and led to the growth of two communities—Centralia on the west bank and Grand Rapids on the east. In 1900, the communities merged as Grand Rapids before being renamed Wisconsin Rapids in 1920.

The rapids fueled the region's lumber industry, carried countless log drives, and later powered the paper mills that became the foundation of the local economy. Though the rapids have since been tamed by dams, they remain the reason Wisconsin Rapids exists where it does today.

Did You Know?

Before public swimming pools became common, the Wisconsin River served as the

community's summer gathering place. In the early 1900s, a municipal swimming area with sandy beaches and slides was established near the Grand Rapids, giving residents a safe place to cool off and enjoy the river. The project grew out of a community effort to reduce drownings and was championed by local businessman John "Jack" Arpin. The surrounding grounds were dedicated as Legion Park in 1922 in honor of local World War I veterans.

2. Green Bay and Western Railroad Roundhouse

Built in 1891, the Green Bay & Western Roundhouse served as the heart of railroad operations in Wisconsin Rapids. Steam locomotives were brought here for maintenance, repairs, and to be turned around before continuing their journeys across Wisconsin.

The arrival of the railroad was essential to the city's growth. It connected Wisconsin Rapids' booming lumber and paper industries to markets across the Midwest, transporting logs, paper products, and other goods throughout the region. The roundhouse played a vital role in keeping trains – and the local economy – moving.

Today, the brick roundhouse is one of the few surviving railroad roundhouses in Wisconsin, standing as a reminder of the community's rich railroad heritage and the industry that helped shape Wisconsin Rapids.

3. The Mead & Witter Families

Resting here are members of the Mead and Witter families, whose vision and generosity helped shape Wisconsin Rapids into the community it is today.

Jere D. Witter was a businessman and one of the driving forces behind the creation of the Consolidated Water Power & Paper Company. His dream of combining the Wisconsin River's waterpower into a single enterprise laid the foundation for the city's thriving paper industry. After Witter's death in 1902, his son-in-law, George W. Mead, took over the company and guided its growth for nearly five decades, helping establish Wisconsin Rapids as one of America's leading papermaking communities.

Beyond their business achievements, the Mead and Witter families were devoted philanthropists. They supported schools, libraries, parks, hospitals, and cultural organizations, leaving a lasting legacy that continues to benefit the community today. Their names live on throughout Wisconsin Rapids, from landmarks and foundations to the historic Witter home, now the South Wood County Historical Museum.

4. Sycamore Tree

Standing along the west bank of the Wisconsin River is a remarkable sycamore tree with roots tied to a simple Christmas gift and a family story from more than a century ago.

The tree's story began in Brooklyn, New York, when a spray of sycamore seed pods was tied with a red ribbon and placed on a Christmas package sent to Mrs. William Jones by her mother. Before the turn of the 20th century, those seeds made their way from New York to Wisconsin Rapids, where they were planted and eventually grew into the magnificent tree seen today.

Over the decades, the sycamore has become a familiar landmark along the river, quietly witnessing the growth and changes of the Wisconsin Rapids community. From the days of early settlement and river commerce to the modern city that surrounds it, this tree serves as a living reminder that history can grow from the smallest of beginnings.

5. The Great Pine

This massive white pine log stands as a tribute to Wisconsin Rapids' rich lumbering heritage and the towering forests that once covered the region.

The original tree grew southwest of the Armory on 2nd Avenue South, remarkably escaping the lumberjack's axe for decades. When it was finally cut, the tree was 181 years old. It had already been standing for 78 years when the Civil War ended in 1865, making it a living witness to generations of local and national history.

Measuring 18 feet long and 41 inches in diameter, the log contains more than 500 board feet of lumber. Trees like this supplied the logs that were floated down the Wisconsin River during the great log drives, fueling the sawmills that helped build Wisconsin Rapids and much of the surrounding region.

In 1967, this remarkable log was preserved as a monument to the city's lumbering past, reminding visitors of the forests and industry that shaped the community.

6. Centralia Pulp and Paper Mill

The Wisconsin River paper industry traces its beginnings to this site. In 1887, the Centralia Pulp and Water Power Company converted an existing sawmill into a pulp and paper mill, marking the start of an industry that would shape Wisconsin Rapids for generations.

The pulp mill stretched across the river to the island where today's hydroelectric plant now stands. The paper mill and boiler house were located on the island, while the paper finishing and shipping facilities stood just south of this marker.

The mill operated with two paper machines and five water-powered pulpwood grinders, which transformed logs into wood pulp for papermaking. After 25 years of operation, the paper mill was destroyed by fire in 1912. The remaining pulp mill was removed in 1920 to allow for the expansion of the hydroelectric plant.

From these humble beginnings, the Wisconsin River valley grew into one of the nation's leading paper-producing regions, with Wisconsin Rapids earning its place as a center of the American paper industry.

7. John Jones' Headstone

One of South Wood County's most mysterious historic sites, the lone headstone of Civil War veteran **John Jones** stands along the Wisconsin River in Port Edwards. Jones, a Welsh immigrant and employee of the Edwards & Clinton sawmill, served in Company G of the 12th Wisconsin Infantry during the Civil War. For decades, historians debated why three different headstones appeared to mark the burial of "John Jones." Research eventually revealed there were two soldiers with the same

name serving in the same regiment, solving much of the mystery. Today, the riverside grave remains a unique reminder of the area's Civil War history.

8. Ed "Strangler" Lewis

One of professional wrestling's greatest champions, Robert Friedrich, better known as "Strangler" Lewis, spent his boyhood in Nekoosa.

Born in 1890, Friedrich began wrestling at just 16 years old after challenging a local rival in a match to raise money for his baseball team. While serving as an assistant athletic director at the University of Kentucky, he studied human anatomy, developing a scientific approach to wrestling that helped set him apart from his competitors.

Known for his devastating headlock, Lewis became one of the most dominant wrestlers of his era. He is the only wrestler to have been recognized five times as World Heavyweight Champion, famously defeating Joe Stecher in 1920 to reclaim the championship.

After retiring from competition, Lewis dedicated his time to mentoring underprivileged youth. His remarkable career earned him a place in the Wrestling Hall of Fame, where he is remembered alongside legends such as Georg Hackenschmidt, Jim Londos, Joe Stecher, and Earl Caddock.

9. Center of the State of Wisconsin

Did you know this is the geographic center of Wisconsin?

In the early 1950s, Governor Walter J. Kohler, Jr. made several visits to the Pittsville area. During one of those visits, he officially proclaimed Pittsville the exact center of the State of Wisconsin on June 27, 1952.

Following the proclamation, professional land surveyors determined the precise center point, located approximately 250 feet north of this marker. Today, Pittsville proudly celebrates its unique distinction as the "Center of Wisconsin," making it a popular stop for travelers exploring the state.

10. Rudolph Grotto Gardens

The Rudolph Grotto Gardens began in 1920 as the vision of Father Philip Wagner, who promised to build a shrine to the Virgin Mary after recovering from a serious illness while studying for the priesthood in Europe. Over the following decades, he transformed the hillside behind St. Philip's Church into a peaceful sanctuary of winding paths, colorful gardens, and hand-built shrines.

Today, the five-acre site features dozens of shrines, the unique Wonder Cave, and the Father Wagner Memorial Museum. Welcoming visitors of all faiths, the Grotto Gardens remain one of Wisconsin's most distinctive religious and cultural landmarks.

Until Next Time...

Thank you for joining us on our first South Wood County Historical Scavenger Hunt! We hope this adventure encourages you to look at familiar places in a new way and discover some of the stories hidden throughout our communities.

We hope to continue this as an annual event, with new locations and new stories to explore each year. From Wisconsin Rapids to the surrounding towns and villages of South Wood County, countless histories await discovery.

We look forward to sharing more of them with you in the years ahead!