

# Walworth County Historical Society



# THE LEGACY

WINTER 2012

## Calendar for 2013

Beginning March 18th the Friends of the Museum will meet the 3rd Tuesday of every month at the Museum

March 28th: Judge Robert Kennedy @ Peoples Bank, Elkhorn, 1-3pm

April 15th: Blooming Prairie School tours begin

April 20th: Mary Tanner, Antique Appraisals @ Peoples Bank, 1-4pm, \$ 5.00 charge for an appraisal

April 25th: Larry Kocha, Burlington Mormons, Place & Time TBA

Museum opens May 16th, Wed-Sat, 1-5pm  
Webster House Museum  
9 E. Rockwell St.,  
Elkhorn  
By appointment & for group tours call  
262-723-4248

## BIT OF HISTORY

By Doris Reinke

Walworth County has had its share of interesting figures. One of them was John Fox Potter, whose name is prominent on the county map. There is Potter's Lake near East Troy and Potters Road.

Potter was one of the first lawyers in East Troy and its first postmaster. In 1856 he was not only a county judge but a member of the state legislature. Soon he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. He finished his career as a politician by becoming Consul General to Montreal, Canada, being appointed by Abraham Lincoln in 1863.

Despite all these positions he was best remembered as "Bowie Knife Potter".

A bowie knife was an all purpose one, used for everything from cutting brush to skinning game. On the frontier it was considered a necessity.

Its connection with Potter came when there was a fight on the floor of the House during a debate between north and south supporters. As a result, Roger A. Pryor, a southerner, challenged Potter to a duel. Potter was the one challenged so he had the choice of weapons. Potter had been a long-time opponent of dueling as a means to settle disputes. When faced with the need to actually take part in a duel or be branded as a coward he was understandably perturbed. To solve the problem he selected bowie knives as the weapons to be used.

The very idea of a duel fought at close quarters with knives dismayed Pryor. He refused to duel in such an ungentlemanly manner. As a result there wasn't any duel and the turn of events became a big joke in Washington.

Potter emerged as a local hero and was given the name Bowie Knife. This name followed him for the rest of his life.

Another thing that followed him were bowie knives. From all over the country as the duel story made its rounds, knives were sent to him by well-wishers and friends. He soon had a whole collection of them.

## THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME

By Patricia Spicer Blackmer

2012

This incredible research journey began on a beautiful fall afternoon when Franklin Stoneburner showed me a rare and unique artifact related to Delavan's nineteenth century history.

I was awe struck when he handed me a Grand Army of the Republic membership badge from the George H. Thomas, Post #6 of Delavan, Wisconsin. In my hand I held the badge of a Civil War Veteran. It was a piece of history that was possibly 130 years old and in virtual mint condition. It was a badge that had been worn by its owner who was a Union soldier that fought to protect and defend the principles our country was founded upon. I could just feel that he had proudly worn this badge to attend lodge meetings and march in parades. The reverse side of his badge was worn when he honored the deaths of fellow Civil War comrades at their funerals. Because I am a member by lineal descent of the Daughters of Union Veterans of the Civil 1861-1865, the badge held even more meaning. I realized at that very moment that I simply had to know who the owner of this unique piece of Delavan's history was.



Franklin, an historian in his own right indicated that the provenance of the badge had been an auction purchase he made in the late 1950's from the Robert T. Seymour estate at 305 Racine Street in Delavan. He knew little more.

Intrigued with this bit of information, I asked if I could assist in identifying its owner and began the search to find him.

The first question posed was "why was the badge in the possession of Robert T. Seymour?" While the answer to this question led me on a research journey to the Aram Library newspaper archives, the Walworth County Historical Society, the county courthouse, the Wisconsin Veterans Museum and area cemeteries, I began with a computer search of Robert T. Seymour.

The online search of Seymour found that his father was Robert T. Seymour, Sr. and he had not been a Civil War veteran. Next a search of Seymour's mother yielded the name of Maretta Huntress Seymour. Further investigation regarding her family led me to her father, Gideon David Huntress who served in the Civil War along with one of Maretta's brothers. Both men enlisted in Walworth county, Co. K, 7<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry. Could it be that easy that the badge was either Seymour's grandfather's or uncle's? After locating Gideon Huntress' obituary in the "Walworth County Independent" published in the June 12, 1890 issue, it confirmed that the badge was not from the Huntress family. Both Gideon Huntress and his son had been members of the G.A.R. Post #76 in Elkhorn.

Further research through census records regarding Robert T. Seymour, Jr. led to the discovery that his mother, Maretta resided with he and his wife, Winifred at the 305 Racine Street address in Delavan during the 1920 and 1930 census. She was listed as the head of household and surprisingly

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her last name was no longer Seymour, but Brabazon. This prompted further investigation which led to her second marriage record. She had married a John Richard Brabazon in Johnstown, Rock county Wisconsin on May 29, 1894.

Checking Delavan and the state of Wisconsin Civil War records, a soldier by the name of John R. Brabazon was found. This led to a search of area cemetery records to establish a possible death date for this man. One had to look no further than Spring Grove Cemetery in Delavan to find a stately granite headstone inscribed with the John R. Brabazon name and his vital information.

Of course, this led to the Aram Library and its newspaper microfilm where the obituary for this man of "many and varied experiences" was found in the January 25, 1917 issue of the "Delavan Enterprise". Nearly half of the front page of that issue was devoted to John R. Brabazon and entitled "Battler in War and Politics Passes".

And thus, unfolded the story of a Delavan legend. John R. Brabazon was born April 23, 1843 in Stanford, Welland on the Canadian side of Niagra Falls. He died on January 24, 1917 at 3:30 am from apparent heart trouble at his Racine Street residence in the city of Delavan.

His family had settled in the area in 1857 and when the Civil War broke out, he enlisted in Co. E of the 28<sup>th</sup> Wisconsin Volunteer Infantry on August 21, 1862. He was discharged from Union service at Brownsville, Texas on August 23, 1865.

His war service was extensive and led him to battles and skirmishes in the states of Kentucky, Tennessee, Missouri, Louisiana, Alabama, Florida and Texas. He sustained what was regarded as a slight wound while engaged at Fort Spanish, Mobile, Alabama.

Following his service, he settled on a farm in Sugar Creek where he remained for sixteen years before returning to Delavan where he raised poultry. He developed a very lucrative business supplying and shipping poultry and eggs all over the country. He eventually abandoned the poultry business to start a truck gardening business which was equally prosperous.

Brabazon served as a member of Delavan's city council for many years and was known for his efficiency.

He was a member of the Knights of Pythias No. 59, the Odd Fellows, the Modern Woodman and the G.A.R. At the time of his death, he was commander of the Delavan G.A.R. post. "To him the G.A.R. lodge and his old war-time comrades were foremost and he was instrumental in bringing many of their reunions to the city and was the mainspring in maintaining the Memorial Day observation".

It was said that his funeral was one of the largest ever held in Delavan!

His obituary was also published in the rival area newspaper, "The Delavan Republican" on January 25, 1917. In a paragraph near the end of the article was the key to ownership of the badge: Brabazon was survived by his "esteemable" wife, three children and one step son, Robert T. Seymour of Delavan.

We concluded that Maretta Huntress Seymour Brabazon, the third and last wife of John R. Brabazon had saved the G.A.R. badge her late husband so proudly wore. Following her death in January of 1939, Robert T. Seymour, her son became the owner of that badge. Upon his death, his estate was put up for auction where Franklin Stoneburner purchased this remarkable piece of Delavan Civil War history and has been its custodian for the past sixty years.

Stoneburner has decided to share the history he so devotedly preserved by donating the Grand Army of the Republic, George H. Thomas, Post #6 Delavan membership badge owned by John Richard Brabazon to the Delavan Historical Society. The Daughters of Union Veterans, Mary Chesebro Lee Detached Tent #23 has purchased an archival display box for the preservation and display of this badge.

In addition, during the author's research, it was found that the grave site of John R. Brabazon no longer has a G.A.R. marker signifying his service to the Union. The Daughters of Tent #23 will honor the service of this Civil War veteran by installing a marker at his gravesite.

From "Recollections" printed in the Elkhorn Independent by Frank Eames, Contributor:

## Spectacular opera house fire paved way for city's current municipal building

The recent *Recollection* about the "venerable" Post Office building prompted a reader to call with the comment: "If the Post Office building can be called 'venerable,' what about the Municipal Building which is even older?" An excellent question and our response was kind of a "duh??" before promising to do a *Recollection* about the "also venerable" Municipal Building.

Before that, however, we have to do a column on an historical event that literally laid the groundwork for the Municipal Building: the spectacular fire that destroyed the Sprague Opera House on July 2, 1925 on the site of the present building.

E. H. Sprague, a prominent Elkhorn attorney, built the opera house in 1898 and it served the community well for 27 years until the fire. The ornate auditorium on the second floor hosted traveling vaudeville shows and plays as well as concerts and high school graduations. The ground floor held the post office, Christian Science reading rooms and the Elkhorn Variety Store operated by Erv Last and Andy Oleson.

As the July 4th holiday approached, the variety store had a large display of fireworks. At about 5 p.m. on Thursday, July 2, while there were customers in the store, an exploding cap pistol apparently ignited the rest of the fireworks and there was an unintended interior display. The customers and sales people got out safely, the fire department responded quickly and got the blaze under control. Except for the obvious damage to the store, it appeared that the fire was out.

However, later that night it appeared that the metal ceiling in the store had gotten so hot during the blaze that the timbers above started to smolder and smoke began to appear through the upstairs windows. This time it was "Kattie, bar the door!" time and the call went out to neighboring communities for help. Fire departments came from Walworth, Lake Geneva, Williams Bay, East Troy, Delavan, Whitewater, Burlington, the Assembly Park on Delavan Lake and Janesville.

It soon became apparent that there was no saving the opera house itself so the emphasis was on saving the nearby structures, including Sprague's law office building next door on Walworth St., the Schmidt Ice Cream factory and home just to the south on Broad St., the Columbus Hall and Masonic Temple across Broad St. to the west. Amazingly, all these nearby structures were saved although the heat did break windows in the Columbus Hall and Masonic Temple and small roof fires on both buildings were quickly extinguished. The wooden portions of the opera house collapsed inward, leaving only the brick exterior walls standing.

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The community was shocked and dismayed at the loss of their popular and heavily used community center and thoughts quickly turned to "what's next?" The Independent even sponsored a contest seeking suggestions for what should be done with the choice downtown location. While the prize for the winning suggestion was only going to be a modest \$2, there were a number of entries ranging from a hotel and theater to a 5 and 10 cent store. Homer Ludden, Supt. of the Light and Water Commission, and Fred Marty, proprietor of a shoe store, had to split the meager prize money with their identical suggestions for a municipal building that would house all city offices and services. It took another five years but their suggestion finally resulted in the current Municipal Building in 1930, which will be the subject of the next Recollection.



All that was left of the great Sprague Opera House after the fire of July 2, 1925 were the brick exterior walls. Amazingly, its closest neighbor, the Sprague law office with the city library on the second floor, survived the blaze and is still in use by the Sugar Creek Mutual Insurance Co. Once it was obvious that the Opera House could not be saved, firefighters from all over the area concentrated on saving neighboring structures with huge success.



This picture was submitted by Merrybell Seeber. It is Frank, Francis and Violet Holt on their first farm at Lauderdale Lake. Census records showed they lived there in the 1910's.



## REGISTER YOURS NOW

Mitchell did it - Quinney did it - Voss did it - Wendt did it  
Now you need to do it!

The Wisconsin State Fair last year honored 161 property owners for Sesquicentennial & Century Farms and Homes. The Walworth County Fair recognized 3 families. Applications are now available for the 2013 year.

The Century Farm and Home Program began in 1948 to celebrate century farm owners carrying on family traditions that are deeply rooted in a pioneering spirit, hard work and dedication to Wisconsin's rich family farming tradition. The Sesquicentennial Home Program was added in 1998.

If you have a farm or home and would like to register it applications are available at the Doris Reinke Resource Center. Application deadline is MARCH 1, 2013 so get yours now.

# MEMBERSHIPS EXPIRED 12/31/2012 RENEW NOW

## WALWORTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

9 East Rockwell Street

P.O. BOX 273

ELKHORN, WI 53121

Phone: 262-723-4248

E-mail:

walcohistory@tds.net

Web Site:

www.walcohistory.org

Newsletter:

walworthchsnewsletter@

gmail.com

### Officers

Doris Reinke  
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Dan Richardson  
Vice-President

Gwen Tveter, Secretary

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Dan Richardson

## WALWORTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP FORM

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP CODE \_\_\_\_\_

TELEPHONE \_\_\_\_\_

E-MAIL \_\_\_\_\_

Membership Level: (Check One) [ ] Single \$15 [ ] Family \$20  
[ ] Contributing \$25 [ ] Patron \$50

### Other:

Donation \$ \_\_\_\_\_ [ ] Webster House Museum  
[ ] Heritage Hall [ ] General Fund

### Volunteering Interests: (check all that apply)

[ ] Computer Work (w/ Microsoft Publisher, Word, Excel, Access, Other)

[ ] Photography [ ] Sewing and Fabric Conservation

[ ] Gardening [ ] Tour Guide (Docent) [ ] Research Assistant

[ ] Baking [ ] Painting & Maintenance [ ] Other \_\_\_\_\_

### Our Wish List

Can you help out by contributing one or more from the list below? Contributions of these items will help keep our costs down.

- Paper towels, toilet paper, hand soap
- Photos or your family members, places and/or events from Walworth County
- A copy of your Walworth County family history
- Plastic cups, plates, bowls, napkins
- Garbage bags, light bulbs, & postage stamps

COLLECTING,  
PRESERVING  
AND  
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THE RICH HISTORY OF  
WALWORTH COUNTY

We welcome and solicit articles, citations, and photographs by members and volunteers for possible publication in *The Legacy*.

Please send material or suggestions to: [walworthchsnewsletter@gmail.com](mailto:walworthchsnewsletter@gmail.com) or WCHS, PO Box 273, Elkhorn, WI 53121 or call (262) 723-7848.

Any articles must observe copyright restrictions and credit must be cited for material from other sources. All decisions are final and rest with the editorial staff.

**WALWORTH COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

**[www.walcohistory.org](http://www.walcohistory.org)**

**CORNERS OF ROCKWELL & WASHINGTON STS**

**Webster House Museum: Wed thru Sat 1-5 pm 262-723-4248 (*Seasonal*)**

**Doris Reinke Resource Center: Wed & Thurs 1-4 pm 262-723-7848**

**Or By Appointments**

“COLLECTING, PRESERVING AND SHARING THE RICH HISTORY OF WALWORTH COUNTY”

**Walworth County Historical Society  
P.O. Box 273  
Elkhorn, WI 53121**