

# Along the Riverway

A publication of the Sauk Prairie Area Historical Society

Spring 2021

## Badger's early beginnings: A look back 80 years ago at the price of the 'tools of war'

*Editor's note: This is the first in a series of articles this year honoring the 80th anniversary of the beginnings of the Badger Ordnance Works plant in 1941.*

The well-known white buildings of the Badger Ordnance Works ammunition plant that sprawled virtually as far as the eye could see, remained a snapshot in time spanning more than 60 years.

Those 100s of acres of white structures are gone, and are now mere photographic memories housed amid the quiet, peaceful, rolling, largely wooded land that is now the Sauk Prairie Recreation Area today. In all, there were more than 10,000 acres of pristine land gobbled up by the government for manufacturing the "tools of war."

To stand on that land today and look around, it appears to have returned to its pristine setting of the prairie and farmland 80 years ago.

Only six years ago, the Ho-Chunk Nation celebrated the return of its portion of precious, ancestral land back to the tribal domain, after its taking from the federal government.

What won't be returning, however, are the homesteads where, in some cases, multiple generations raised their families and farmed.

But on the heels of the Great Depression, the plant brought an economic boost to a rural community,

the residents of which answered the call, some even maintaining careers and long term jobs. For a total of 33 years in active production supporting WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, the plant employed approximately 23,000 people.

Among those workers was Verlyn Mueller, who worked there for 16 years, with the first six years monitoring instrumentation that controlled manufacturing processes. For his last ten years, he was an engineer working on plant modernizations projects.

Little did he know then, he would become the primary public voice that advocates for the importance of keeping the rich, complex history of Badger



"We have doubled and redoubled our vast production, increasing, month by month, our material supply of the tools of war for ourselves and for Britain and for China- and eventually for all the democracies. The supply of these tools will not fail -- it will increase."-- President Theodore Roosevelt, Fireside Chat, May 1941

alive for new generations of local residents and the millions of tourists who have visited the site for the last 23 years.

*Part two will appear in our summer issue of Along the Riverway in August.*



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*Along the Riverway* editor  
Kim Lamoreaux



*From the desk of SPAHS board  
president Lise Meyer Kobussen*



*Dear valued members of the Sauk  
Prairie Area Historical Society,*

Words cannot express my deep  
gratitude for your generous outpouring  
of support for the Tripp Heritage  
Museum's sudden need for two new  
furnaces. Despite the challenges that the  
pandemic has brought us, you have been  
so gracious in contributing to an  
unexpected major expense. These  
furnaces are more efficient and safer, so  
we will see a savings on the heat bills.

The amount of donations was so much  
more than the cost, we will be able to  
apply the balance to a roof replacement  
fund. We know that will be the next  
large capital expense we will face in the  
upcoming years. Thank you for  
providing for such a critical need. You  
are wonderful!

The 2020's have come in roaring, but  
so did the 1920s. With that in mind, we  
want to craft a visual story at the  
museum illustrating the impact of the  
20s on the Sauk Prairie area. Those  
history-making events include: the end  
of the Spanish flu pandemic; the end of  
WWI in 1918; Prohibition; women's  
right to vote; jazz became the popular  
form of music for young people; the  
first color and sound films debuted; Art  
Deco was the style of design and  
architecture; automobiles changed  
where we went and how we spent our  
time.

In our farming community, "power  
farming" was touted as more efficient  
with the tractor replacing the horse,

while electricity was  
spreading into the  
rural areas.

Our large collection of historic  
photographs show how fashion trends  
dramatically changed for men, and  
especially women, ushering in the  
flapper era.

Many local events of the '20s were  
epoch. The original toll bridges were  
replaced in Prairie du Sac (1921) and  
Sauk City (1922), and included several  
days of dedication ceremonies. The  
Decot fire siren was invented in Sauk  
City. A semi-pro men's baseball team in  
1923 called the Twin City Red Sox, in  
which players were paid, brought  
thousands to watch their games. Saloons  
became restaurants serving food and  
pop during the Prohibition years.

As we make plans to build this exhibit  
highlighting the area 100 years ago,  
please let us know if you have any  
interesting items or photos you would  
like to loan us that help to illustrate  
Sauk Prairie in the 1920s. We'd love to  
hear from you. Please contact us by  
email or phone.

Thank you again for the love!

*Lise*



# Museum furnace replacement response is phenomenal

The entire board of the Sauk Prairie Area Historical Society is collectively speechless. At the end of last year, they sent out an appeal letter for donations to help pay for a \$5,200-plus furnace replacement at the Tripp Heritage Museum. The news of a worn out heat exchanger on one unit was a disaster. It was just too costly to replace.

"The old furnaces were installed in 1993 when the Tripp was still the library," said museum manager Jack Berndt. "These are twin furnaces, and we needed to replace both units so they were compatible with each other."

But here's the good news: "The new Lennox furnaces are more efficient than the old, and use an updated circuit board," Berndt said. "If these new twins are as good as the old furnaces, we won't have to replace them again until I'm 101 years old."

The breakdown and the cost hit like a ton of bricks, but the response was even more overwhelming. The generosity of the SPAHS donors and members is truly something to shout about. The board humbly thanks you from the bottom of their hearts.

Let's hear it for Dischler Heating, Cooling & Fireplaces of Prairie du Sac for installing the new funaces on Dec. 15.

Please see the list of our generous donors on page 4.



## Notable milestone:

## 50 years ago Sauk Prairie area mourns August Derleth



It will be 50 years ago this year that Sauk Prairie lost what is arguably its most famous resident, author August Derleth, whose huge body of work is internationally known. That includes over 150 books published, with some having served as the basis of several television shows.

But he was a hometown boy at heart, who wrote as prolifically about where he grew up in Sauk City, as he did about his fictional characters.

Many local residents still remember him as a gregarious, somewhat flamboyant,

street-roaming, community-involved neighbor, whose stories and poetry are often set to the backdrop of the sandy shores of the Wisconsin River.

Derleth passed away on the 4th of July, 1971, from a heart attack at 62 years old. He left behind two teenage children, April, who died at the age of 56 on March 21, 2011, and Walden, now 64.

The August Derleth Society (ADS) formed in 1978 when Richard Fawcett, a school administrator from Connecticut who had discovered a few books of Derleth's, came to the former Firehouse Restaurant in Prairie du Sac and held a meeting about forming a fan club of the author. By 1988, the ADS had a dedicated room in the Sauk

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A logo for Maplewood Sauk Prairie Health & Rehabilitation Center. It features a large '50' with 'CELEBRATING' above it and 'YEARS' below it. A tree icon is inside the '0'. The text 'Maplewood Sauk Prairie' is to the left, and 'Health & Rehabilitation Center' is below the '50'.

A photograph of two elderly women sitting together and smiling. The woman on the left has short grey hair and wears glasses and a light-colored top. The woman on the right has short white hair, wears glasses, and a patterned scarf. They are in front of a stone wall.

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DERLETH continued from page 3

City Library for Derleth's books and as a place to display photos.

Past president and now ADS newsletter editor Tracy Heron of Mayville said membership and interest in Derleth's work continues to grow with younger generations.

As we reflect on the 50 years since Augie's passing we are encouraged to see a resurgence of interest in his writings," Heron said. "The ADS faces the future, as Augie did, with optimism and 'a sense of adventurous expectancy.'"

In July 2016, the ADS celebrated the grand opening of the August Derleth Center, right next door to the former Derleth Park in Sauk City on Water Street, which has since been renamed. Walden Derleth was one of its keynote speakers that day, and spoke about the loss of his father.

"It has been exactly 45 years and five days, almost to the minute, that my father was pronounced dead, and I unfortunately, watched him die," Walden told an audience of about 60 people. "The August Derleth Society since its inception really helped soften that memory. The Society and its members, through the newsletters, helped heal that wound."

Door County area author Norbert Blei was so intrigued with Derleth, he traveled to Sauk City to meet him a few months before Derleth died. Blei had lunch with him, visited Hugo Schwenker at what was once the old harness shop and got a tour of the Sauk Prairie area, all to the backdrop of Derleth's live narration. Blei said Derleth drove, while "he pointed out house after house, telling again the stories of the people who inhabited those places... gossip, as it were, but rendered into art as he put it all down in his

*"... the sound of muted voices coming out of the darkness of porches along the way, making the small talk that is the essence of living." ~August Derleth*



The front page of the Sauk Prairie Star newspaper featured Derleth's untimely death on July 8, 1971.

books, especially 'Walden West' and 'Return to Walden West.'"

Blei's resulting story of that meeting was published in the Chicago Tribune Magazine in August 1971. Blei said

Derleth didn't want to read it before it was published so, sadly, he never saw it.

Derleth is buried in the St. Aloysius Cemetery on Lueders Road, across from his former home known as the "Place of Hawks."

Find more information and photos of Derleth on the ADS website at <https://www.augustderleth.org>.

The advertisement for Green Acres Restaurant features a photograph of the restaurant's exterior, a two-story building with a white facade and a small porch. To the right of the photo is a green circular logo with the text 'Green Acres' and 'The Place For Steaks!'. Below the logo, it says 'GOOD TIMES, GREAT FOOD. BUILT ON A CENTURY OF TRADITION.' At the bottom, it states 'Open 7 days a week Outdoor dining available', 'Bar opens 4 pm Dinner 4:30 pm, Mon. - Thurs. 4 pm Fri. - Sun.', 'Call for Reservations 643-2305', and 'GreenAcresRestaurant@gmail.com'.

The advertisement for John Joseph Coffee features a decorative logo with the text 'John Joseph Coffee' in a stylized font. Below the logo, it says 'Want coffee? johnjosephcoffee.com' and '112 Van Buren St. Sauk City, WI 53583'.



## Passion for the past:

# SPAHS board members are united to preserve history



### Lise Meyer Kobussen board president

A love of history is in Lise's DNA. Her dad, Paul Meyer, was a well known business owner in Sauk City, and a previous president of the SPAHS. He was also a driving force in coordinating the Sauk City 125th

Jubilee celebration in 1979.

"I was raised with history," Lise said. "There's really a family tradition in terms of volunteerism and giving back to the community."

Lise was one of those many young people who left her home town for several years, but her heart was in Sauk City. She returned home, and eventually came to own and manage Meyer Insurance upon her parents' retirement. Like her dad, she took a leadership role where she could.

Lisa said, "I joined the Sauk Prairie Area Chamber of Commerce and the SPAHS to see what I can do to help navigate the community forward as well as maintain our roots with our history."



### John Hart, secretary

A native of the area, John's love of history started early in life as a member of the Wisconsin Junior Historical Society for kids. It was the perfect preparation for his role on the SPAHS board for the last three years.

"My folks drove me into Madison from Sauk in the late 60s to go to

historical society meetings," he said.

He vividly remembers a college class where he learned about the 1954 campaign led by then Sauk Prairie Star newspaper editor Leroy Gore to recall the infamous

Wisconsin U.S. Senator Joe McCarthy. The senator is best known for his irrational campaign against perceived Communist sympathizers in the arts, academics and the government at the time.

Fast forward to the present. John said he was impressed with the popular SPAHS programming and events in recent years coordinated by both museum manager and lifelong friend, Jack Berndt and his wife, Jody Kapp Berndt, formerly the SPAHS director of development. John hopes to focus on expanded digitizing of the audio and video collections of the SPAHS so that more of them can be accessible online.



### Ron Kindschi board member

Ron's roots in the Sauk Prairie area arguably run the deepest of any of the board members. His ancestors arrived from Switzerland in 1846, and settled

in the area before Wisconsin even became a state. You can see the legacy of the stack and block masonry work of one of those ancestors in the historic Salem Ragatz Church

Continued on page 7

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BOARD continued from page 6

Road and County Road PF just outside Prairie du Sac.

Ron joined the board a few months ago, but the SPAHS has been an important part of his family for years. His sister Marlene Meyer, cousin Jerry Kindschi along with his wife Alice all served on the board for



**Becky Nickel and John Nickel, vice president**

Throughout their 36-year marriage, John and Becky have liked to do things as a couple. Their roles on the SPAHS board is one of those things. While

Becky is from Illinois, John grew up in Janesville, and the couple lives in Marshall, John's ties to the Sauk Prairie area run deep, and date back three generations.

John spent many days visiting his grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins (including his second cousin, Lise Meyer Kobussen), in Sauk City. His grandfather Frank Littel was an undertaker in Sauk City. Conrad Kuoni, a builder and long-time postmaster, was his great grandfather. Kuoni was a Civil War veteran who lost his



**Cheryl Carroll, treasurer**

From hockey to history, Cheryl brings an exhaustive background in volunteerism and a wide range of interests to the board.

She moved to the area in 1988, and was among a handful of women referees in the state while being a referee and parent in the Sauk Prairie Youth Hockey for many years. She has spent years as a Commander in the Colsac unit of the Civil Air Patrol, an educational cadet program of the U.S. Air Force Auxiliary, in which she teaches young people interested in learning about Aerospace and leadership development.

An accountant and auditor for the Wisconsin

many years. His daughter also served as the board treasurer until recently.

He intends to keep on with that tradition.

"I consider it an honor to do what I can to continue their involvement in growth and strengthening the SPAHS."

leg in the war, and his wooden leg is on display at the Tripp Heritage Museum. There are photos and other artifacts of his ancestors in the museum.

"I walk into the museum, and there are a lot of ties from our family to the past—a lot of different pictures and things that pertain to what we have pictures of," John said.

Becky said they both enjoy serving on the board, and even their past several months of Zoom meetings have been fun.

"We're about getting the message of the history out there and making it available to people," Becky said. "I love the history and how a small little German town did so well being on the Wisconsin River. People want to know where we came from and people have roots there."

Department of Revenue by day, Cheryl embraces her role on the SPAHS board as a new learning experience.

"I like the fact that I'm learning a lot more about the area I chose to settle down in," Cheryl said.

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