

SELHS News

The newsletter of the Sterling Eureka and Laketown Historical Society

Volume 7, No. 3

June, 2007

*Are you an old or new settler in the area? Join us at the Sterling Settlers Picnic
Sunday June 24th Doors open at 11:00 am Cushing Community Center
Potluck at Noon Community Picnic – Free, Open to Everyone!*

Settlers Old and New by Russ Hanson

When I left the Cushing area to begin my career in 1970, the last job I had was working in the Sterling fire tower for the DNR. I drove west from our farm near Bass Lake on Evergreen Avenue and crossed the River Road. There were only a few families living west of the River Road—the Wilsons, Brenizers, Harrises, Edwards, Davidsavors and a few weekenders. Most of the buildings were hunting cabins. Sitting in the tower I could assume less than 20 people lived in the area I watched for fires.

Coming back after 37 years I am surprised to find West Sterling with scores of year round homes and people. Some are retired, but many commuting to jobs and others working at home with their own businesses or through the internet.

In 1970, most all of the farms in the Sterling, Laketown and Eureka area were fully occupied with dozens of small dairies; beef herds, and pigs; the land all farmed or pastured; the barns in use.

In 2007, I think there are two milk producers in Sterling, a few more in Eureka and several in Laketown. Most of the small traditional farms have disappeared and the big old barns are often falling down.

The old settlers who came, cleared the land, raised corn, oats and hay, have in many places, given way to a new settler.

Some of the new settlers are like me. They left for a career and are returning to retire to their old home area. We have the apron strings of friends, relatives and knowledge of the land we left. We return with different interests and skills learned

while away and are changing the local area to fit with our retirement needs.

There are other new settlers who have come to the area for retirement too, some changing from a weekend cabin owner to permanent residence, others building or buying to have their lake or woods home away from the city.

We have increasing numbers of new settlers who live in our area and commute long distances to jobs in the Twin Cities or suburbs.

Some of the new settlers come to run local businesses. We see Cushing with many new business owners, giving us hope that we will continue to have local shopping available. Of course, we must shop there or we will lose them to the Hwy 8 mega businesses.

Some new settlers are gardeners and add interest as they try specialty crops. We see grapes to supply the two new wineries in the area. New orchards, an interest in farmer's markets, organic farmers along with traditional farms are cropping up around us.

We have new neighbors who have moved to the old dairy farms where they fix up the buildings and raise llamas, goats, sheep, a few cattle, horses, chickens and others animals as a part of their interest in living the rural life. They bring new skills and interests to share. Often they can tap the old settlers for knowledge of the local area.

As the area changes, it is good for the old and new settlers to get to know each other; to learn from each other and to share their interests in what we have in common—the appreciation for the

rural character of our area; for the quality of our water and wildlife.

Settlers, new and old, must make the effort to get to know each other; to become good neighbors. We should enjoy what is new and what is old without prejudice and in the spirit of making a better, more interesting and enjoyable neighborhood!

Broom Making

(See Todd at the Settlers Picnic!)

“Benjamin Franklin brought broom corn seeds to America” Todd Schweim of West Sterling told the Sterling Eureka and Laketown Historical Society as he demonstrated how to make an 1840s Shaker style broom. An old story says Franklin found a few seeds in a broom he purchased in England and carefully planted them back home and thus started America's broom corn production.



For the past three years Todd has been making brooms as a hobby. “I work at a computer and this gives me an real alternative! No electricity; no noise; just me, the broom corn and a few antique tools.”

“Broom making is a lost craft. I know of only one other person in Wisconsin who makes brooms by hand. He lives in Green Bay” said Todd. Todd told us all about the history and techniques for making brooms while making one for our museum.

Most modern brooms are machine made in factories and are wire wound. Rubbermaid is one of the largest manufacturers. Most of the broom corn is grown in Mexico now, but one hundred and fifty years ago it was a large and important

crop and broom making a lucrative home craft for farmers in the U.S.

In the old days, a house had many brooms. Along with the normal long handled floor broom, there were smaller brooms for special tasks. A hearth cleaning broom; a cobweb broom, a whisk broom etc. Todd makes a variety of brooms including some that are primarily decorative. One specialty is a cake tester broom that has straws to break off and use to test to see if a cake has finished baking.

A well made broom should last ten years. What damages a broom is standing it in the corner, This will bend the bristles. A broom should be hung on a hook on the wall to preserve it.

Broom corn is really not corn. It is related to the sorghum family. The seed head on the top of the plant is made up of a stalk with many stiff straws, one to two feet long. When it is mature, the head is bent over in the field to hang down and dry for a few weeks and then cut off. Todd buys seed heads (hurl) in 300 lb bundles with the seeds already stripped off. A broom requires assembling the hurl, binding it to a handle, stitching the broom flat and trimming to length.

First the seed heads are sorted for similar lengths and prepared for broom making. The stalks are carefully added around the Sassafras handle and wrapped very tightly with a strong cord gradually adding more and more stalks until the broom has sufficient straws for its use. Linen string would be used in an authentic broom, but nylon works well too. In a traditional broom, the stalks are soaked in water to make them pliable, then woven together around the handle to hold it in place. Once the hurl has dried it is as strong as any commercially made broom. The woven handle makes for an especially decorative look.

The primary pieces of equipment are a winder, a broom vise and a broom cutter. The broom vise is used to pinch the broom flat so that 4-6 rows of stitching can be sewn into it to make it firm. The broom cutter, similar to a paper cutter, is used to cut the base of the broom flat.

It took several years to find the antique equipment for broom making. Todd found his equipment in Missouri. He bought them from a retiring broom maker there who gave him a week of training included in the deal. A blacksmith

made the large double pointed needles with a string hole in the middle for sewing the broom straws together. A regular broom takes about one hour to put together after the stalks and handle are ready.

A century or more ago, many brooms were made by farmers in the Midwest, especially in Indiana, Iowa and Missouri where the broom corn plant grows well. A broom company sold broom making equipment to the farmers. The company taught the farmer how to make the brooms and would supply the raw materials. The farmer was paid a set price per broom. Many farmers would purchase the equipment and make brooms during the winter months.

Occasionally, Todd takes the equipment on the road and demonstrates at shows. He plans to show us how to make a broom at this year's Sterling Settlers Picnic!.

Mathilda Smith—Cushing Pioneer

Mrs. Unita Chivers, currently staying at the Luck Pioneer Home, tells us that her grandmother, Mathilda Smith was the first woman to live in Cushing!. She ran a sort of hotel at her home for early settlers and travelers.

Mrs. Smith was born in Randolph County, Alabama, in 1854, the sole survivor of triplets. When she was a few years old, her mother died and then two years later her father died too leaving her alone. She was adopted by the McKee family and after the Civil War the family came first to Plainview MN and then to Laketown and settled with other Alabama folks in a small community they called Alabama Corners.

Mathilda married Everett Smith when she was 14 years old in 1869 and they moved to Cushing where they homesteaded, opened the land from dense forest filled with bears, wolves and snakes. They lived at the home that is just south of Kenny Armstrong's just at the bottom of the hill below the school. They raised a family of 4 boys and three girls. In 1902, Everett died, and Mathilda sold the farm and started a hardware store in Cushing and ran it four years before selling it. The hardware was on top of the hill where later the Nick Blacksmith shop was run. Daughter Myrtle was working at the telephone

office in Luck. Mathilda sold the hardware to the Jensen family and moved to Luck and started taking in boarders and soon had a thriving hotel business.

When the train came to Luck, Mathilda and her son George met the passengers and brought them back to the hotel. After two years she moved to Osceola when daughter Myrtle was transferred there and kept a boarding house there. Two years later they were back in Luck running their hotel again. Three years later she moved to the Twin Cities where she lived for many years before returning to Cushing.

When the depression came along in 1929 her entire savings of a life time of hard work were swept away in the Luck bank failure. She was in her seventies and was rather discouraged for awhile when at length her daughter suggested she knit stockings and mittens for sale. She happily went back to work and earned her keep by knitting. Mathilda died at age 83 in Cushing in 1934.

Mrs. Unita Chivers and her sister Marjorie (Mrs. Elliot Olson) were raised near Cushing with their three sisters by their parents, the Soren Christiansons. They remember their Grandma Mathilda fondly and her southern mannerisms.

Unita's husband, Guy Chivers, was a logger and sawyer. He sawed and delivered much of the lumber used in the Luck Yo-Yo factory to make Yo-Yos.

In 1932 Marjorie (Sorenson) Malmberg interviewed Mathilda Smith for a 7th grade history project at the Lanesdale School. Some of the information in this story comes from that interview and some from talking with Unita and Marjorie.

If you have stories of the local area please call or write Russ Hanson, 2558 Evergreen Av, Cushing, WI 54006, 715-488-2776 or email russhan@rconnect.com and share them with our readers.

Cushing History Project!

We are collecting stories, pictures, documents and artifacts for our Cushing History Project for our next book. Share your information and get a free book! Russ Hanson 715-488-2776

Wisconsin Century Family

Information on registering as a family who has lived in Wisconsin for 100 years or more at the Settlers Picnic.

Chickens Gone Wild by Russ Hanson

My neighbor Bert Brenizer liked to tell stories when he got older. He told us this one when my brother Marv and I stopped to visit after gopher trapping on his farm. Bert gave us a bonus of 15 cents each for the gophers we caught in his fields. We had told him we liked trapping gophers and liked earning money, but we didn't like to have to club the occasional gopher that our trap didn't kill. His story as I remember it from 50 years ago. Bert lived where his granddaughter Ione Muehlhauser lives now on Evergreen Av.

***** Bert's Story*****

"Wake up!" I heard my wife Hattie calling to me through the fog of sleep. We had just moved into our new big farmhouse on the hill here. "What's wrong?" I asked? "Listen! Something's in the chicken coop scaring the chickens." I listened and heard the chickens in an uproar, cackling, squawking and making enough of a racket to be heard all the way into the house from the coop one hundred yards away.

Barely awake, I got out of bed wearing just my red flannel underwear, grabbed a match from the holder on the kitchen wall, and my jacket and the barn lantern in the hallway. I raised the chimney, lit the lantern, adjusted it to full brightness, the familiar smell of kerosene fumes helping to wake me up. Holding it out front of me in my right hand I headed sleepily for the coop. The lantern lit only a small arc in the path ahead. It was a dark cloudy night in early fall. I didn't have my shoes on and the worn dirt path heading to the barn and chicken coop was easy to follow and felt cool and moist on my bare feet.

As I approached the coop, the noise grew steadily louder. All forty chickens were in a panic voicing their fear and disapproval of the intruder. Was it a rat, a weasel, a mink, fox, dog or bum? All at one time or other had designs on Hattie's chickens. I realized I wasn't very well prepared; no weapon and bare feet.

The chicken coop door was closed as it should be; just the little door for the chickens

to come through was open so that meant a small animal. It would run away when I opened the door and shined in the light. I had better chase it out before it did any more damage. I cautiously opened the door just enough to see in, lantern ahead of me and peered into a scene of chickens gone wild. I couldn't see with the dim light, so took a step inside ducking a few flying hens.

I looked ahead and at the same time I saw it I smelled it—a skunk with its black glistening fur and white stripe right in front of me in the middle of the coop greedily licking a broken egg.

The skunk saw me just as I recognized it. It raised its tail to spray me—and I was right tight behind him, going to get full blast. I sort of unthinkingly reached out and grabbed the skunk by its upraised tail testing the old story that a skunk can't squirt if he is held by the tail. The skunk snarled and twisted, dangling from its tail trying to bite me, but there was no spray! The skunk smelled like a skunk, but seemed unable to get its spray glands working. Haw! A skunk held by the tail can't spray, I thought feeling pretty smug.

It was pretty strong smelling in there between the chicken mess and the skunk. Chickens were still in an uproar and flying around like me like a bunch of rabid bats. I backed out and closed the door, satisfied the chickens would calm down now.

"I bet my hand will stink after this" I was thinking to myself. Well, I realized I was in a difficult situation, not really in control of skunk at all. He was still trying to bite me and threatened to wriggle loose at any time." I thought, "what about giving him a huge whirling toss?" I wasn't sure but what he would spray me on the release, and of course the skunk would be free to come back and bother the chickens again. I headed for the house to get some support from Hattie.

"Hattie! I got a skunk by the tail. He's getting away! Bring me the stove poker!" I yelled to Hattie who was waiting nervously in her night clothes on the porch. Hattie rushed into the kitchen and picked up the iron poker and brought it. I had stepped into the

kitchen entryway and set the lantern on the table. I adjusted my grip with two hands and got a good firm hold on him.

“I can’t let go or he will stink me up” I told Hattie. “I’ll whack him with the poker and we will have an end to this!” I grabbed the poker from Hattie and hauled off and cracked the skunk right on the head. He immediately went limp and died.

Hattie was standing inside the kitchen. “Get that thing out of the house!” she yelled gagging from the sudden blast of skunk spray spreading over her brand new kitchen. “Well, I found out something the hard way,” Bert told us. “A skunk don’t spray when you



hold him by the tail and he is alive. But when he dies his muscles must relax enough

to let the stink shoot out full blast! We had just built this Sears Roebuck house new and had just moved in from our old log house over there. We had to move back out and stay in the old house for nearly two months until the new house aired out a little and we got used to the smell. Hattie barely talked to me the whole time! Come over here in the entryway and 30 years later I bet you can still smell skunk!”

We politely sniffed the faint smell of skunk near the door. Walking home Marv and I decided that Bert should have at least killed the skunk outside, and probably should have given him a whirling toss and resolved to do that if we were ever in the same situation. Adults sometimes learned things the hard way, but we could certainly learn from their mistakes! It reminds a little of the time Dad was showing off his rope lassoing skills and learned that having a badger at the end of your rope put you there too!

Russ Hanson is a member of the Northwest Writers group that meets monthly alternating in Grantsburg and Frederic. The skunk story was written for an exercise in using the senses in your story! If you are a budding or experienced writer, join us and enjoy sharing your works with others. 715-488-2776

SELHS Membership Form		Local History Books and booklets
<p><i>Send completed form and check Made to SELHS to SELHS P.O. BOX 731 Cushing, Wi 54006</i></p> <p>Membership Levels <i>Individual Life</i> \$10.00 \$100.00</p> <p><i>All memberships in excess of \$10 as well as any additional donations to the Sterling Eureka and Laketown Historical Society are fully deductible.</i></p>	<p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>City _____ State _____ Zip _____</p> <p>Phone _____</p> <p>Email _____</p>	

History in the Neighborhood

Thursday June 21 SELHS business meeting

6:00 pm Cushing Community Center

Sunday June 24 Sterling Picnic

11:00 – 2:00. Sixty Ninth annual potluck picnic celebrating settlers new and old in our area. Free and open to the public. Lots of demonstrations, old pictures and a chance to visit with your neighbors and old friends. SELHS books, information and memberships renewal specials!

Thursday July 19 SELHS business meeting

6:00 pm Cushing Community Center

Thursday – Sunday July 26-29 Polk County Fair

History exhibits at the Red Schoolhouse.

Saturday Sept 1, Cushing Tigers Reunion

2:00 pm at the Cushing Community Center. The Tigers played from 1904 for 70 years.

Thursday August 16, SELHS business meeting

6:00 pm Cushing Community Center

Saturday September 22, the 2nd annual River Road – Hwy 87 Ramble

A do-it-yourself celebration of the River road-Hwy 87 loop from St Croix Falls to the County line and back. Business open houses, historical stops, garage sales, etc.

Officers and Directors

Please feel free to contact the officers of the Sterling Eureka and Laketown Historical Society with any questions, comments or suggestions!

We encourage you to join and help preserve local history! Old and New Settlers Welcome!

Marcie Marquardt President (715) 648-5505

Mark Johnson Vice President 648-5213

Donna Blair, Secretary/Treasurer 483-3112

Russ Hanson, Newsletter, 715-488-2776

Meetings are 3rd Thursday of the month 6:00 pm
Cushing Community Center



Harry Brown lived north of Cushing. He went around the country with his tent show visiting each small town with plays, music and movies.