



Preston Historical Society

PO Box 138
Preston, Minnesota 55965

A 501(c)(3) Non-Profit Corporation

NEWSLETTER
March 2021

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President's Notes

By: Sheila Craig

Active, involved, and moving forward to preserve the history of Preston! That is the best way to describe the local members of the Society.

We welcome Kerry Soiney as the new Vice President for the Preston Historical Society. He is originally from Preston and a few years ago moved back to the home his mother owned.

Ice Skating Rink

Compiled By: Gabby Kinneberg

As Preston Tourism Director, I asked at a monthly meeting of PHS what members could tell me about the ice skating rink. It is currently located between the Fairgrounds and the River along the road to the sewer plant. There are some of the answers I received.

Bob Maust shared that: In the 40's it was on the east side of the Sinclair station where the bowling alley is now and before that it was on the west side of the south bridge south of the Farmers Home bldg. I skated more on the river. We used to have much colder winters and the river would freeze over between the Rapids. They would freeze a foot thick or more. They would cut the chunks out and put in the old burnt out creamery building where Wojtkiewicz house is today.

Diane Johnson shared: I just remember that when I was in grade school (mid-1960's) the ice skating rink was located on the football field by the school. (The current post office is located on a portion of that field.) Kids could bring their skates to school and utilize the rink during recess. Unfortunately, I was not a skater (not coordinated enough!). I think there was a warming house but can't say for sure. I don't know who was responsible for maintaining it...

Some memories from the Walsh kids from the early 1970's were:
"I can still smell the scent of the stove warming and drying out mittens in the warming house".



Photo courtesy of Joanne Hall

Group of kids skating with POP in the background. This shows the rink when it was down by the south bridge on the west side of the street.

Continuing with comments by the Walsh kids:
“We were always so excited for the ice rink to get flooded each year.”
“Open skate was fun but the hockey game was always more fun!”
“Once you hit a rock you were definitely going to fall. The best ice was when they would bring hot water from the creamery.”
“Mr. Carlin always helped us littles get our skates on and sell us candy bars. He was the best!”

Collections Committee Report

By: Norma Vogt

The Collections Committee has been very busy. First many hours have been put in on updating the collection list, tagging each item on which accession numbers are listed and a description. So far about 250 items are completed with many more to do.

All the cassette tapes of persons in Preston who were interviewed during the late 1970's have been digitized. Funding for the digitizing of the tapes was divided evenly between two grants: 1) from the Preston Area Community Foundation and 2) the Preston Public Utilities “Round-up Dollars”. Now to listen to them all!

Photos are being identified, scanned and organized by subject and placed in acid free clear coverings.

If going to the Preston Library, check out the Preston High School graduation pictures that go through 1959. The framing needed some repair but is all now spruced up.

2021 Raffle

By: Sheila Craig

The Preston Historical Society voted at the February meeting to move forward with a raffle in 2021. Dan Christianson, F & M Bank has again agreed to match our raffle ticket sales with up to \$1,000. We would welcome any items or gift certificates for prizes. Please contact Sheila with your donations by April 1.

Goals for 2021

Adopted at February 2021 meeting

Two goals from 2020 were completed last year: The digitizing of the 1978 tapes, and the completion of the interior and exterior repairs on the O'Hara School

1. Increase revenue through raffle, city contribution, & tractor ride.
2. Work on historical documentation by: updating the inventory and posting pictures on website and flash drive.
3. Find ways to preserve history stories and continue with history moment
4. Public Relations: more caboose open houses and other events in the community.
5. Monitor maintenance on assets, especially the boxcar and continue exploration of long-term facility options.
6. Continue tractor ride with limit of 100 tractors.
7. Membership: increase number and participation.
8. Improvements to the elevator: extend wiring and install lighting system.
9. Apply for State funding for museum space.

Christmas Decorating Project

By: Aaron Fox

When the call came out for Christmas decorating, Preston Historical Society stepped up! Inspired by the decorations around town, we decided to add a bit of Christmas cheer to the caboose. Jon Devries and Aaron Fox pulled together extra Christmas decorations to light the Caboose from within. Jon set up a timer so the lights automatically came on around dusk and shut down later in the evening.

For next year, we hope to add exterior lighting and some additional decorations as well as designated “selfie” location so you can all share a photo of your visit to Christmas at the Caboose! We may even pull together an opportunity to visit with Santa for a Saturday or two!

If decorating for holidays is a hit, we may expand to decorating in front of the schoolhouse as well. If you have ideas or want to join in the fun, please let us know!

Tractor Ride 2021

By: Elaine Maust

The Preston Historical Society has again voted to have their 8th Annual Tractor Ride. It will be held this year on Saturday and Sunday, September 18 and 19th. We had to skip a year due to the virus but know that all those tractor driving fans will be glad to hear the news. The committee is busy planning a route, meals and mailing out registration forms. We hope for a beautiful day in Bluff County Minnesota.

Membership Updates

By: Sheila Craig

We welcome a **new lifetime business member:** Kelly Printing & Signs.

We encourage all our members to recruit new members – individual, family, or life members as well as yearly or life business members.

Plaque Project Update

By: Sheila Craig

Thanks to Jeff Thauwald for his recent \$100 donation.

The donations do not mean that the donation will necessarily go to the item in the name, but rather it is the name of the level of giving. Our plaque project has grown over the years to now include:

14 names on our \$300 Elevator plaque!

28 names on our \$200 Caboose plaque!

43 names on our \$100 Boxcar plaque!

THANKS to everyone who has donated through this project. There is still more room on the plaques!!!

Ila Olstad has been writing her history of life in a railroad family. With typing and picture scanning assistance from Jon DeVries, they have submitted the article to “The Milwaukee Railroader”, the official publication of the Milwaukee Road Historical Association. Enjoy this first segment with more to come in future newsletter issues. See Pages 4 -5 .

Growing up in a railroad family in S.E. Minnesota

By: Ila Mae Olstad

INTRODUCTION

I got up early this October morning of 2020 and started looking at *The Milwaukee Railroader*, the magazine of the Milwaukee Road Historical Association, that a neighbor and member of the Preston Historical Society had lent me. I was seeing the beautiful pictures of the steam engines and the Hiawatha passenger trains – all the sounds, smells, and memories of my life came back. I was born in 1931 and am now 89 years old and need to write things down or they just fly by.

I was raised right next to the railroad tracks – about a block away from the Preston depot, roundhouse, and coal sheds. I grew up mostly telling the time of day by the sounds of the trains coming and going and switching back and forth the cars to take or leave for Reno.

We would hear the steam engines coming into town and would run to the depot to see the trains pulling in with all the cars behind. We watched the people coming and going – stepping off onto a little stool placed by the conductor working the train. We looked at the connections between cars and listened to the rhythm of the train as it pulled up to the nearby water tower.

A RAILROAD FAMILY IN SOUTHEAST MINNESOTA

Reno: My father, Arthur R. Noel, was raised in the busy railroad town of Reno in the southeast corner of Minnesota along the west bank of the Mississippi River. It was also the eastern terminus of the Preston –

Reno branch - which had been a narrow gauge line until 1901.

Dad's father was German and was the Section Foreman in Reno – under the surrounding hills of the Mississippi River valley. I never knew my grandfather as he died in the early 1920's. He was married to Lena (Mary) Richards and they had three sons: Arthur (my dad) and Ed and Frank – both of whom worked for my dad on the section crew in Reno. Arthur married Milda Roth – a Reno girl – and both went to a small country school about a mile from Reno next to Crooked Creek Church. After school, Dad and his brothers worked on the track. They had their first child, Violet, in 1921 – the year grandpa died. They stayed with my mother's mother in Reno for a year until they moved to Spring Grove where Dad was Section Foreman until 1923.

Preston: In 1923 my family moved to Preston and lived there until 1946 when Preston had a flood of “biblical” proportions which covered all the railroad tracks as well as reaching our home and the streets nearby. The flood also wiped out the railroad between Reno and Caledonia leaving the line to Isinours as our only connection.



Steam Engine in water crossing Fillmore Street



Hilltop View 1946 Flood



Old Mill – limestone. Mill Street S.W.



St. Paul Street – South – 1946 Flood

(Photos courtesy of Ila Olstad)

switched Preston from Dubuque to Austin for crew assignments – so my Dad and Mom moved to La Crescent to preserve his seniority.

They later moved back to Preston for retirement. I stayed in Preston to graduate

from high school – I lived with the Russ Vischer family. Russ was working in the Preston depot, so I still heard all the news about the railroad.

The “center” of action was the Preston depot. The sounds of morse code clicking and the smell of the oil in the wooden floors still come back to me. A waiting room was in the center with a black coal stove with coal bucket tools, a ticket window with timetables and an office door on one side and chairs lining the walls.

The agent’s office on one end faced the tracks and had three windows in a bay to allow looking both ways to see the trains. The agent’s desk had the telegraph and large envelopes to attach to freight cars going out. The other end of the depot had a room with a large door for a luggage cart high enough to reach the train cars for loading and unloading.

Outside was a brick platform and the “dray man” with his horse and wagon to meet the trains and pick up items and deliver them to stores or homes – groceries, furniture, etc. There were often shipments ordered from the Sear’s catalogue – hardware, clothing, lumber, even houses!

And there was postal mail to be delivered too. People used penny post cards delivered by the train to set up visitation dates back and forth. My mother and grandmother kept in touch with their cards and would get whole letters written on them. On each end of the depot was a town sign – PRESTON – for anyone coming into town on the train to see.

NEXT INSTALLMENT: Our House and the Hobos and Dad’s work on the "section gang" - Preston to Harmony to Isinours.

**IN MEMORIAM, CECIL COOK,
FEBRUARY 17, 2021**



Cecil Cook, June 30, 2019 signing his book at the dedication of "The Milwaukee Road" trailhead sign.



Cecil Cook with Dale Montang, former Preston resident who donated PHS his log book from his time as a railroad fireman in Preston



Dick Petsch visiting with Cecil Cook

Archie Cook wrote us this week as follows: *"It is with great sadness that I notify you that my Father Cecil Cook passed away in his sleep last night at his home. He was 90 years old and he will be dearly missed!"*

Cecil, accompanied by his son Archie, attended the dedication of "The Milwaukee Road" trailhead sign on June 30, 2019 and autographed his books in the caboose. He later dined and shared stories at the Branding Iron with PHS members.

Highlights of his obituary note: "Cecil boarded his last train on Wednesday, February 17, 2021 at the age of 90. He was born on December 14, 1930 on the family farm outside Waukon, IA. He and his wife Jean were married 62 years and raised four children in Des Moines and Pleasant Hill, IA. His great love was photographing railroads in the Midwest. He authored six books on rail history and was working on a 7th this year. He spoke often to historical societies and was a member of the National Railway Historical Society (NRHS) and the Milwaukee Road Historical Association (MRHA)."

(Photos Courtesy of Jon DeVries)

Preston Historical Society Officers

President: Sheila Craig (507.273.1481)

smeercraig@gmail.com

Vice President: Kerry Soiney

Secretary: Elaine Maust

Treasurer: Charles Sparks (507.765.4785)

charlessparks@mediacombb.net

Newsletter Editor: Sheila Craig

E-mail: prestonhistoricalsociety@gmail.com

Mailing: Box 138, Preston, MN 55965

website at www.gethookedonpreston.com.

Web Master: Gabby Gatzke

gkinneberg@prestonmn.org

