



# Preston Historical Society

PO Box 138  
Preston, Minnesota 55965

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

## NEWSLETTER July 2021

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### President's Notes

By: Sheila Craig

Preston Historical Society is fortunate to have a wide range of ages of our members. Pictured on Trout Days hosting the open house at the caboose are the oldest and youngest members – Ila Olstad and Paxton Smith, our student member.



### Items Back at O'Hara School



The Fillmore County Historical Society has returned to the O'Hara School, items that are original to the school: a "red bench" which was used in the front of the room and individual grades would go to for lessons, the teachers chair and original pull down maps.



### Membership Updates

By: Sheila Craig

We welcome three new members to the Preston Historical Society. A new lifetime member is Robert Marx, Maple Grove, MN. We also welcome two new individual members: Kathrine Knittel, Knoxville, TN and Fran Sauer, Preston, MN.

## Collection Committee Report

By: Norma Vogt

The Collections Committee has been receiving Preston and Preston Fountain School items and City of Preston and Preston businesses items along with photos. Monday's are work days where items that have been approved are inventoried and accession numbers assigned to each with description and donor. Photos are each being viewed, identified, numbered and given a description. All photos are scanned.

We want to thank Gary and Kate Feine, Rick and Sue Grooters & the Dianne Ruud family for all the donations.

Since our student member was a high school senior and graduated from Mabel-Canton High School, PHS hosted a graduation party to honor Paxton Smith. Pictured are several PHS members with Paxton.



## Tractor Ride 2021

By: Elaine Maust

Plans for the 2021 Tractor Ride are well underway with almost 40 tractors signed up plus extra riders in one of the two people wagons. The ride is set for Saturday and Sunday, September 18 and 19<sup>th</sup>. To register your tractor to drive or to register to be a rider in the people wagon, contact Elaine Maust at 507.765.2453.

## Raffle Update

By: Sheila Craig

Sales of raffle tickets are going well this year. Many were sold at the caboose open house and a table display at the Preston Pop-Up Market on Trout Days. Tickets do remain for the August 1 drawing.

## History Moments

*At our monthly meetings we have a history moment. We now share some of them with all of you.*

### History and Mystery Part I - Luther Preston

By: Aaron Fox

John Kaercher named the city of Preston. Warren Upham's book<sup>1</sup>, Minnesota Geographic Names, includes this description: "PRESTON, first settled in 1853, organized May 11, 1858, received the name which has been given to its village, platted in the spring of 1855, by John Kaercher, its founder and mill owner, "in honor of his millwright, Luther Preston."

In the same year a post office bearing this name was established, and P [Luther]

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<sup>1</sup> Minnesota Geographic Names: Their Origin and Historic Significance, Vol. 17, by Warren Upham, 1920, page 190-197

Preston was appointed the first postmaster. The mail was delivered by the stage line of Wheeler & Nichols.

Kaercher obviously thought well of Luther Preston but what do we know about Luther Preston? He doesn't show in the area prior to 1855 and disappeared from Preston after 1865. Where did he go? If so esteemed, why did he go?

Luther Preston brought his family from Freeport, Illinois to Minnesota sometime before 1855. He was a Millwright, the first Preston Postmaster (1855), one of three election judges (1856) with John Kaercher and the county treasurer (1859).

He purchased 40 acres in section 25 in June of 1859. He was not only a millwright, he was a landowner, a pillar of the community and held positions that reflected strong public trust in his character and abilities. He appeared to be building a life in Preston.

He was also allegedly unjustly accused, convicted of mail fraud and sent to prison. The History of Fillmore County (published 1882) documents Mr. Preston as presenting his bond as Treasurer in 1859 and resigning that position in 1860 due to financial difficulties.

Indeed, the financial difficulties resulted in further problems for Mr. Preston because the 1860 census records Mr. Preston as a household member of the State Penitentiary in Stillwater for robbing the US mail. We know this is our Mr. Preston due to his age and occupation as a millwright.

This is where the mystery comes in. Did Preston rob the mail? If not Preston, then who? And Who pardoned Luther Preston? Later in the History of Fillmore county, the volume describes Mr. Preston as “ a

millwright and a good mechanic, and a gentleman of honor and integrity, but during his administration there were some postal irregularities.

Thefts of mail were traced to this office, and he was arrested and tried, and sent to state prison *although the belief is universal that he is not guilty*. Taking all the facts and circumstances into consideration, it is certain that his remaining silent before his accusers and submitting to bear the punishment and obloquy of the crime, was an act of heroism.

As a slight measure of reparation, he was soon pardoned. So, sometime between 1860 and 1882, it became common knowledge that Luther Preston was NOT guilty of mail fraud. Then who robbed the mail?

This research began because we were contacted by a professor who believes that Luther Preston was pardoned by Abraham Lincoln. While that is interesting, I think of the mystery of who Luther Preston was protecting is more interesting!

To have any hope of figuring that out, we need to trace Luther Preston through history, who he associated with before he was sent to prison, anyone who might have left Preston abruptly around the time, the political environment and what Preston did after being released from prison.

Lincoln was memorialized as a truly compassionate man in his choice of pardons to grant. If he did, indeed, grant a pardon to Luther Preston, was the pardon due to his innocence or to release him to serve in the Union Army during the Civil War?

Research on the pardon might help sort that question out but that is research for another

time. For today, we are focused on confirming who our Mr. Preston is, who he was associated with and tracing his path through historic records.

As noted above, we know that Luther Preston worked for John Kaercher as a millwright. John Kaercher and Theobald Schweitzer relocated to Minnesota in 1854. Kaercher and Schweitzer may have been related. John Kaercher's mother was Madeleine or Margareth Schweitzer.

Another woman, Barbara Schweitzer also shows in land records at the time. Additional research shows that Barbara Schweitzer is John Kaercher's sister and Theobald Schweitzer's mother. Kaercher came from Freeport, Illinois. So, it is likely that Preston, Kaercher and possibly Schweitzer knew each other in Freeport.

Mr. Preston shows in the 1865 census in a joint household in Preston, MN. This would be after he was released from prison. The other family sharing the household is the Wheeler family consisting of Henry C Wheeler, his wife Liza and children, Cora and Edwin. Henry C Wheeler (34) and Lizzie Wheeler (19) show in the 1860 census in Preston with a 2 year old child named Eddy (Edwin). Who is Henry Wheeler and why did Luther and his family move in with them?

Henry C Wheeler is noted as an early resident of Preston. William Sawyer references Henry Wheeler as the sheriff in 1856. Indeed, Elizabeth Wilson Preston married Henry Clay Wheeler. Elizabeth is found in historic records as Elizabeth, Liza and Lizzie. We need to research Henry Wheelers association with the Wheeler & Nichols stage line. The delivery of mail via the stage line represents another point at

which the mail could be robbed without easy detection. Could Luther Preston have taken the fall for his son-in-law? We will look at local newspapers of the time to see if we can uncover more details on the crime.

The Preston Family data is consistent for Luther with the 1850 Census which shows Luther along with Mary and Elizabeth in Freeport, Illinois. Interestingly, John Kaercher also came from Freeport, Il. This may be the connection that brought Luther Preston to Minnesota.

To Be Continued!

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## **A History Moment Lone Ranger in Preston**

**By: Robert Marx**

August 7, 1961. Clayton Moore, the Lone Ranger appeared for two shows in front of a packed grandstand at the Fillmore County Fair in Preston. Moore, was best known for his portrayal of The Lone Ranger in the 1950's western TV show of the same name. Also appearing with Clayton Moore was actor Chuck Courtney, who played the Lone Ranger's nephew, Dan Reid, on the television show.

Over the years, Moore grew to transcend the role of the Lone Ranger, making public appearances for decades in costume to espouse the character's moral code of justice and democracy. At public appearances, Moore lectured to children against guns, drugs, alcohol, smoking and foul language. Moore liked to say that the character embodied the creed that "everyone has within himself to make this a better world." Clayton Moore was a one-of-a-kind real American hero.

*Note Newspaper clipping on next page!*



## More History Moments

By: Ila Olstad

*Excerpts by Jon DeVries from an article submitted to **The Milwaukee Railroader** (to be continued in upcoming PHS newsletter issues.)*

### Part 2:

#### Our House And The Hobos

Our house was adjacent to the tracks leading to the depot, another track leading to the roundhouse and another south to the old mill.

We were in the center of all the train activity. Both big towns and small towns were dependent on the railroad – and this was absolutely true of Preston and the towns on the line. Everything and anything was transported by train. It was also a way for people to easily travel from town to town. I just read about a schoolteacher who rode the train every day to her school.

I know there was an early morning train from Preston to Reno, one around noon, and an evening train back. My mother and dad could go to Reno and spend several hours with my

Grandmother and return in late afternoon/early evening. Mom would go at strawberry time or grape time as Grandma Roth always had a big garden. Mom would bring some – I still have a grape basket. The Preston and Reno households stayed closely connected by the trains.

The hobos – homeless and/or migrant workers – usually traveled alone on the trains but they had their own communication system. Our house was somehow marked as a good place to visit. Often there was a knock on the back door by a hobo asking for food. No one was ever refused something to eat. Bread, sandwich, and maybe a bowl of soup if Mom had it.

Once in a while one would ask for work for food. We always had a large garden – potatoes, tomatoes – and there was always work to do. We also had a woodshed so they would chop some wood for kindling. Anyway, no one was turned away at our house. I can't remember every really being afraid of them – they were simply homeless, and we respected that. Some were known by what they were wearing, and they would have a big gathering in Iowa each year and choose a king and queen of the year.

#### Dad's Work On The Section Gang Preston to Harmony to Isinours

Dad's section of track for maintenance went half-way to Harmony (to the big hill on the bike trail) and from Preston to Isinours where it connected to the La Crosse - Austin line and started up the "Big Hill" to Fountain. The hill to Fountain was very steep and sometimes it required a second engine.

Isinours had a small restaurant (with good pies) near the depot and a turntable for engines and equipment to "turn" for the trip back to Preston and two sidetracks to allow trains to meet and cars to be picked up or left off. (There are now historic markers where the Isinours depot and the turntable were located).

In the winter Dad would get up early, dress warm, and ride the snowplow "flanger" – a separate car pushed ahead of the engine – which

also had to be raised up for roads and bridges. I know it was a long cold ride all day. In the spring when the ice on the Root River broke up, Dad would have to dynamite by the bridges to break it up.

Dad had a section of crew of two to four men depending on the season. After work each day he would fill out his reports for the day at a fold-down desk which my family and I recently restored (see picture). Dad had beautiful penmanship.



## Summer Extra Work Gang

When Dad went on summer extra gang, someone local with experience did his Section Foreman work. There was another family man who always came and took care of the motor cars when Dad was on summer gangs. He would pick up the workers in the morning and take them to where they worked that day.

I think Dad went his first year on an “extra gang” somewhere close to Beloit with Brother Ed in the early 1930’s. Ed stayed in the Beloit area and raised his family, but he ended up working in the depot area.

I remember when the “Big Shots” came up to Preston from Milwaukee and Chicago in a regular car with adjustable wheels to go on the railroad track – in Milwaukee yellow. Later I also remember them sometimes visiting the extra gang trains.

## NEXT INSTALLMENT: A decade on the Extra Gang trains – Iowa, Dakotas, and Montana.

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