

Merrimack, Wisconsin “Ferryland USA”
Ferry History on Mighty Wisconsin for 17 Decades
1847 - 2017 (170 Years) by Charlotte Hamilton Olson

Wednesday, July 12, 2017

Good evening, remember the words “Once Upon A Time?” Well, once upon a time, more than 170 years ago – like back in...

1843 before the thought of even having a water vessel crossing here, a man simply named Mr. Brown arrived on the Merrimack side and built a cabin and the area was called Brown’s Cabin he was the first settler. Soon cabins were built, held together with mud and small gardens huddled close to the water’s edge. Area pieces or strips of farmland drew attention from the water’s edge back toward the hills or Baraboo Bluffs acquired by squatter’s rights. The area drew further attention because of the wildlife, forest, bluffs and the river at a time when area Indians traded their wares with these newcomers.

1847

.. Now a man named Chester Mattson arrives on the scene and almost immediately he realized the need to somehow cross this body of water and he built the first ferry thus changing the name from Brown’s Cabin to Matt’s Ferry.

Mattson was very enterprising and contacted the Postmaster General a Mr. Collomar seeking permission to have a post office and in doing so he decided to honor this man and called the area Collomar.

1850

The population grew with settlers coming west from England, Germany, Switzerland, the Netherlands etc. There were school teachers, preachers, businessmen, builders and a doctor and a mid-wife and of course farmers. You could tell what country the farmers came from by the design of their barns, even until today.

Of course politicians were among the mix, that being said, a Mrs. J.G. Train said this area reminded her of her beloved home in Merrimack, New Hampshire the way the waters splashed up against the shores and

suggested the name be changed to Merrimack. The powers to be voted and it was so for 100 years from 1850 – 1950 with the “K”.

...Side tracking a bit

Even before Mr. Brown and Chester Mattson in 1831 the Black Hawk War took place downstream. The only Indian/white man conflict in the state. Visitors still climb the hill called Black Hawk’s lookout across from the Prairie du Sac Dam on the east side of the river. Illinois soldiers joined our Wisconsin men in moving the band of Indians down the Wisconsin into the Mississippi area. Among those soldiers were 3 young men (in their mid to late 20’s) from Illinois, Jeffrey Davis, Zachery Taylor and Abe Lincoln.

...Side tracking to the 1800’s

This area on both banks of the Wisconsin continued to grow with different ferry boats and owners and there was a charge to ride. So much for men on horseback, horses pulling wagons, stage coaches per axle and even foot passengers.

A Mr. Flanders looking to this area as a boom, put up \$5,000 to induce the building of a railroad in the late 1800’s, if all but put the ferry out of business.

...1914 The Prairie du Sac Dam opens- Their 100th Anniversary was celebrated just 3 years ago with open houses and guided tour.

That’s when we first had Lake Wisconsin from the dam to Portage giving us a much wider and deeper body of water. Above Portage and below the Dam to the Mississippi the waters are referred to at the Wisconsin River, or Mighty Wisconsin. In 1914 August Derleth (over 100 books he wrote *“The Wisconsin, River of a Thousand Isles”* with a chapter on circus’ that started up around the state. Augie passed away on July 4th. 1971 at age 62.

...Side tracking again in 1940’s

Some say the “K” was taken off when the Badger Ammunition Plant was built and known nationwide to avoid any confusion that was in the early 1940’s, having some keep the “K” on while some took it off when sending out any mail. The postmaster general officially removed the “K”

in 1950 and yet some include the “K” today, like myself and most of my responses come back the same way.

Years ago some lady from Pittsburgh, PA. called me, I still don’t know how she learned about me, however she said, “I hope you get your “K” back on Merrimac. We had our “H” taken off Pittsburgh for 31 years in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s, but we did get it back.” It’s been about 67 years for us and only time will tell.

One day, in the late 1990’s, while driving around Merrimac and Okee I noticed several “K”s posted on various Merrimac signs. Someone who agreed with me, or had a few drinks perhaps did the deed because a couple of the K’s were put on backwards. He or she took upon themselves to purchase alphabet stickers with a “K” to be placed here and there. I did hear who might have done it, a friend who is now long gone and the K’s are also long gone.

...The 1990’s

Talking to, or I should say listening our senior citizens is like reading a history book. I drove Miss Daisy (alias Stella Volk) for nearly 20 years and well into her ‘90’s. In doing so she told me how our forefathers who served in the Civil War was paid in part with land in this area and while serving our country would send love letters home to their wives and girlfriends with the pretty blue flowers that still line our rural roads today. They are called chicory, and yet today used in making coffee in the south.

...Mid 1880’s

famous and meaningful people continued to arrive such as: Mr. Durward (Durward’s Glen), John Muir a Scottish/American went on to California sharing his knowledge of our trees and forests with his name on the National Historical Site at San Francisco Bay. He was an author, naturalist, environmentalist and dubbed “John of the Mountains.” (1838 – 1914) died on Christmas Eve at age 76.

...Another notable that passed our way was the Count Haraszthy (1812-1869), This man was a Hungarian/American Nobleman, adventurer, traveler, writer, builder and is remembered with the title of “Father of

California Wine” when introducing it to that state. When passing this way he spent time on Hwy. 88 rural Prairie du Sac starting Wollersheim Winery that was privately owned meanwhile. Then was Aldo Leopold (1887-1948). Robert Parfrey Parfrey’s Glen in the Baraboo Bluffs and nationally known writer, author, teacher, poet and naturalist August Derleth afore mentioned.

A very enterprising Merrimack man named Gus (Minnie) Kirchstein known for having several businesses and about a dozen children came here in the late 1800’s. I’m mentioning the Kirchsteins because we still have Kirchstein friends and family members now into their 6th generation. Gus owned and operated a grocery store, was the local barber (remember hearing “shave and a haircut – 2 bits?”. He also issued marriage licenses and was the justice of peace.

Other famous people to remember that were here in the later 1800’s included: Henry Ford, Winston Churchill, Zona Gale, Frank Lloyd Wright Aldo Leopold to name a few.

...1914

Before Lake Wisconsin from the Prairie du Sac Dam to Portage this body of water was known as the Wisconsin River where steamers and tug boats traveled. It was about 1/3 the width and shallow allowing a ferry boat to be moved by men using poles. That had to be part of the reason, thinking back some 50 years before that why it took 12 hours to travel from Baraboo to Waunakee via stagecoach with stopovers in Merrimack, crossing the river to Okee for an hour or more to eat, rest or change horses via water and rugged terrain. Again at a time when various ferry boats we privately owned and you paid to ride on them.

When the dam opened it insured the fact that the ferry would no longer be grounded in shallow waters among numerous islands. As the years and decades passed both sides of this lake continued to grow.

wagons, stagecoaches etc.

Merrimack continued to grow with lumber yards and brick yards, wood workers and more businesses. All this like other communities had wooden or plank sidewalks, dirt roads and gas lanterns lining the streets.

When the kerosene ran out, that was it until the next evening when “The Old Lamplighter”, filled them again. Remember the song?

---1924

The Wisconsin Department of Transportation took over the ferry business and provided us with an 8-passenger ferry free of charge. The name Colsac I which is a combination of both Columbia and Sauk Counties with the dividing line between the 2 counties being mid-stream. The captains wore uniforms and hats (or caps) and ran 24-7. This vessel ran nearly 40 years until the spring of

---1962

when Colsac II was launched, a much advanced ferry that could handle 12 vehicles, 24/7. We were told it would be good for some 20 years and there was a sigh... you mean 20 more years like in the ‘80’s before we can see a new bridge? Some residents on both sides commented.

Keep in mind that businesses and families came and went not appreciating the fact that you had to drive around a good part of the year when the lake was frozen. Yet, now today people continue to retire here and build some beautiful homes on and off the lake. Visitors and the locals alike enjoy snowmobiling, cross country skiing and even driven their cars and trucks across and airplanes have landed, I could talk about that, although smart people do not advise it when hearing stories about accidents etc.

--- 1970’s

When we moved here, Lake lots were being sold for \$9,000 each jumping to \$18,000 a year later. Older seasonal homes were either torn down or remodeled for full time residency and lake lots with or without homes were selling for \$250,000 and up. Today it’s not unusual to see beautiful structures valued at twice that amount.

Our Shopper Stopper business was next to the Merrimac Café that had been closed for a year. Our staff needed a place to eat so we purchased that and I named it the Ferry Xing. So, on pay day they would cash their checks and patronize us. We sold the place after some 3 years or so at a time I was collecting pictures and info on the area not even thinking

about writing a book. My first 300 pager that I spent 5 years on came out in

1983 and 20 years later, with much encouragement and continued input from various sources, my second book a 552 pager was printed in 2003, "Merrimack, Wisconsin History & Ferry Tales Et 'Cetera with local, state, national and some international history. A 25 year venture.

---**2003** Some 41 years later, in 2003 Colsac III was launched, again larger, this time it could handle 15 vehicles, 24/7 and for free. The 2 lanes on the Merrimac side were widened to 3 lanes a few years ago soon after, I know this because the state had us sell them our River Shack Ice Cream Stand and the Old Merrimack House – rental (formerly the Shanks house) so they could have 3 lanes instead of 2 from the shore to the main street meaning 85 cars in that area, getting the ferry traffic off of the main street known as Hwy. 78 & 113, a safety factor.

...Wisconsin Indians

I need to mention these people who were here long before the white man arrived. In my book I featured "Red Bird", Chief Black Hawk and Chief Yellow Thunder who died on his 100th Birthday, (1774 – 1874) He requested that his body would be placed upright and facing west with his pipe and tomahawk beside him. He died in his native regalia as the sun flooded his figure, golden candlelight and the flowing river waved a sad farewell.

***"We are here as caretakers of this sacred land,
If we don't protect it, who will?"***

- Peter Mc Gesick

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If you would like a copy of this sent to you via e-mail... let me know by e-mailing me...char@merr.com. Thank you for coming this evening. I hope you enjoyed it a much as I did. Charlotte Hamilton Olson.