



### Articles for November Book Club

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Subject: Orphan Train

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# Wisconsin Magazine of History



*A Growth Industry: The Wisconsin Aluminum  
Cookware Industry, 1893–1920*

JAMES M. ROCK

*The Lawyer in Wisconsin, 1836–1860: A Profile*

HOWARD FEIGENBAUM

*John F. Potter, Consul General to British  
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*Racism and Reform: A Review Essay*

JOHN MILTON COOPER, JR.

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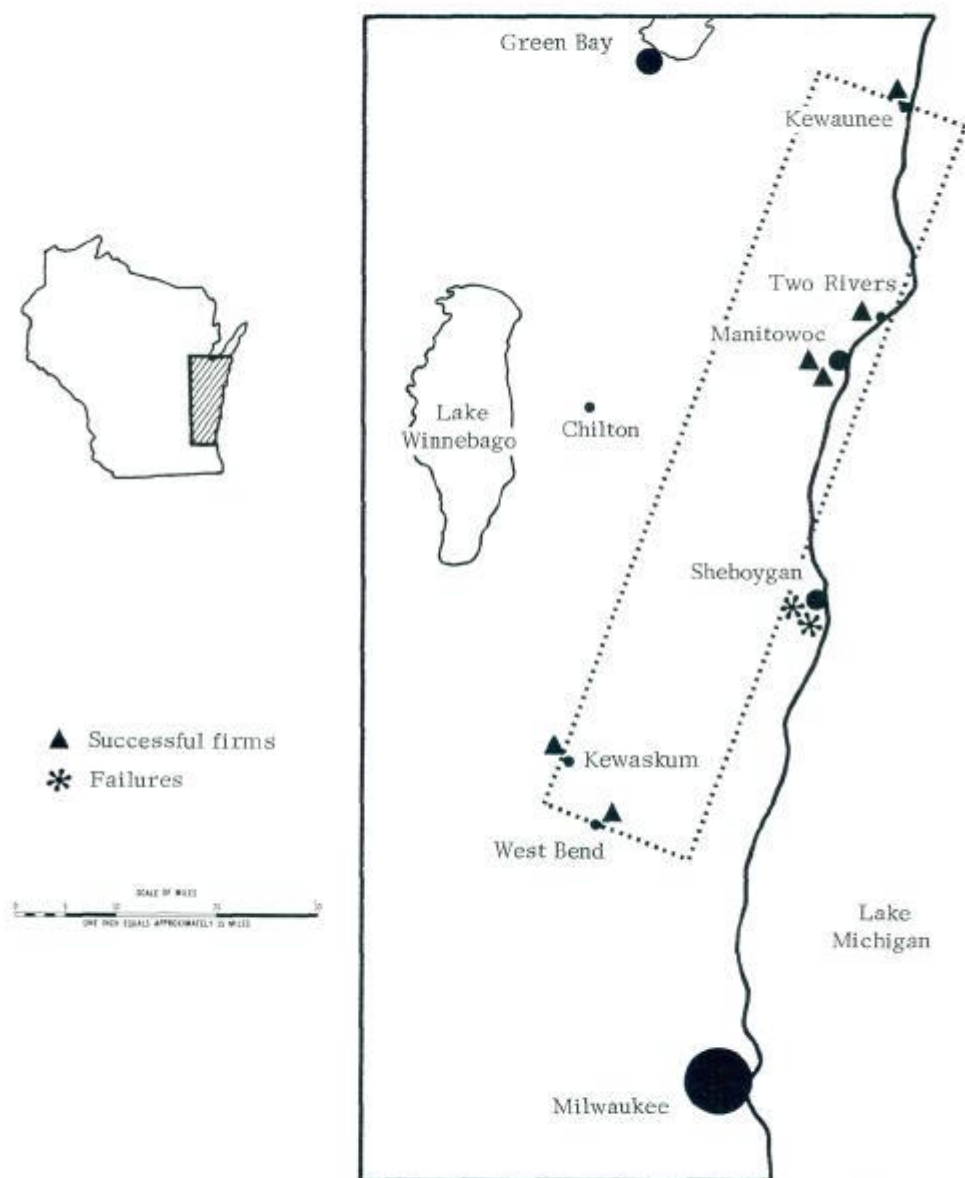
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*Published Quarterly by The State Historical Society of Wisconsin*

THE WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY is published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 816 State Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53706. Distributed to members as part of their dues (Annual membership, \$7.50, or \$5 for those 65 or over or members of affiliated societies; Family membership, \$10.00, or \$7 for those 65 or over or members of affiliated societies; Contributing, \$25; Business and Professional, \$50; Sustaining, \$100 or more annually; Patron, \$500 or more annually). Single numbers, \$1.75. Microfilmed copies available through University

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Courtesy the author

*Location of Wisconsin communities producing aluminum articles, 1893 to 1920.*



# A GROWTH INDUSTRY:

## THE WISCONSIN ALUMINUM COOKWARE INDUSTRY, 1893-1920

By JAMES M. ROCK

IN 1920 the Wisconsin aluminum cookware industry captured over 50 per cent of the total national market, after selling less than 5 per cent in 1910.<sup>1</sup> During the twenty-seven years after the first Wisconsin man got the idea of producing aluminum goods at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, five successful Wisconsin companies—Aluminum Sign Company (now Leyse Aluminum Company), Aluminum Goods Manufacturing Company (now Mirro Aluminum Company), Aluminum Specialty Company, West Bend Aluminum Company (now West Bend Company, a division of Dart Industries, Inc.), and Kewaskum Aluminum Company (now reorganized as Regal Ware, Inc.)—began and prospered. Considered objectively, a new industry producing a product which has many substitutes, is more expensive, and is made from a literally unknown metal; founded in

geographic isolation from its major raw material and its major markets; and with only unskilled labor to draw upon, might reasonably be expected to fail. Yet in a rectangular strip eighty miles long by fifteen miles wide in eastern Wisconsin, with all these potential disadvantages present, it succeeded.

By the late nineteenth century this area along the west-central shore of Lake Michigan, between Milwaukee and Green Bay, had been denuded of the giant white pines which had supported the lumbering industry. Two Rivers, for example, which became the birthplace of the aluminum utensils industry in Wisconsin, sprang up in 1836 following rumors of a gold strike near Kewaunee, and then continued to exist because of the excellent fishing and dense forests nearby. Although other companies were started (breweries, grist and flour mills, a lime kiln and brickyard), the primary companies existed as part of the lumber industry (saw mills, shipyards, tanneries, a chair factory, a pail and tub factory, and a sash, door, and blind factory.<sup>2</sup> When lumbering declined, a new

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am grateful to the men of the Wisconsin aluminum cookware industry for their help and encouragement. A special thanks goes to Hubert R. Wentorf, the sole remaining pioneer of this industry.

<sup>1</sup> The Wisconsin companies lost the majority share of the market in the midst of the Great Depression and did not regain it until sometime after the Second World War. James M. Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry Prior to World War II* (Metal Cookware Manufacturers Association, Chicago, 1967), 227.

<sup>2</sup> The historical information was primarily taken from: Two Rivers High School Class, *Local History of Two Rivers* (Two Rivers, Wisconsin, 1897); Mark Rhea Byers, *Biography of J. E. Hamilton* (privately published, Two Rivers, Wisconsin, 1932); Mirro Aluminum Company, *Mixing Bowl* (January, 1948); and *The Milwaukee Journal*, April 2, 1967.

industry was needed to revive the depressed communities, and aluminum manufacturing filled part of the vacuum.

Although aluminum was not isolated as an element until the early nineteenth century, it constitutes 8 per cent of the earth's crust and is exceeded in amount by only two elements—oxygen and silicon. Hans C. Oersted produced the first metallic aluminum, in 1825, by heating potassium amalgam with aluminum chloride, but he was only able to produce a few small particles of the "metal of clay," as he called it. Ordinary smelting methods could not break down alumina (aluminum oxide), and the chemical process was slow and expensive. It was aluminum's strong affinity for oxygen that denied man its use, except for "conspicuous consumption" items. Because of its properties—especially lightness, ductility, and beauty—the demand for aluminum far exceeded its supply. Consequently, by at least the 1850's, its price was higher than those of the so-called precious metals. This strictly limited the range of articles that could be made from it. Denmark's King Christian X wore an aluminum crown; Napoleon III had an aluminum rattle made for L'Aiglon and aluminum table service for the most honored guests at his banquet table; and he gave the King of Siam an aluminum watch chain as a token of his esteem.

The reduction of aluminum to a common-

place metal of mass consumption had to await the advent of electrochemistry. The perfection of the dynamo in the 1870's provided the electrical key; then only the discovery of the chemical key remained. Because of the inflated expectations of wealth engendered by aluminum's high price, large amounts of money were spent on the search. Two unknown chemists, Charles M. Hall in the United States and Paul L. T. Heroult in France, working independently, discovered the modern electrochemical process for producing aluminum in 1886.<sup>3</sup>

Two years later, Captain Alfred E. Hunt organized the Pittsburgh Reduction Company, progenitor of the Aluminum Company of America (Alcoa), to acquire the patents necessary to monopolize the production of aluminum. With a legal monopoly for the first twenty years of its existence, the financial backing of the Mellons of Pittsburgh,<sup>4</sup> control of the domestic supply of bauxite,<sup>5</sup> control of the domestic hydroelectric power sites,<sup>6</sup> prohibitively high import duties,<sup>7</sup> cartel agreements,<sup>8</sup> and the astute management of Arthur Vining Davis, Alcoa was able to fortify itself so well "against competition that none developed" until World War II.<sup>9</sup> For this reason it was able to control, to a large extent, the growth of aluminum-using industries in the United States until 1941.

With the onset of commercial aluminum production, the demand for it as a luxury good faded and Alcoa was forced to generate new demands for its monopoly. As Arthur V. Davis said, "[It] took a lot of selling to

<sup>3</sup>Hall and Heroult supplied only the chemical knowledge; the electrolytic knowledge was supplied independently by Charles Bradley and Eugene and Alfred Cowles. For different viewpoints concerning the discovery of the electrolytic process for producing commercial aluminum see Charles C. Carr, *Alcoa: An American Enterprise* (New York, 1952), and Alfred Cowles, *The True Story of Aluminum* (Chicago, 1958).

<sup>4</sup>"The Mellons of Pittsburgh," in *Fortune* (October, November, and December, 1967).

<sup>5</sup>Prior to the First World War, almost the entire world's production of bauxite (a mixture of alumina, silica, ferric oxide, and other impurities) was concentrated in southeast France and in Georgia, Alabama, and Arkansas. The war caused the Central Powers to bring into production extensive deposits within the old Austro-Hungarian empire. It is only since 1920 that the discovery of commercial deposits of bauxite has spread around the world. See Donald H. Wallace, *Market Control in the Aluminum Industry* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1937), 34-36, 69-72, 88.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 12, 26, 29, 41, 77, 129-148. It takes about eight to ten kilowatt-hours of electricity per pound of aluminum, an amount sufficient to keep a 40-watt bulb lit for more than ten days.

<sup>7</sup>See, U.S., Tariff Commission, *The Tariff and Its History* (Washington, 1934), 40; U.S., Tariff Commission, *Tariff Information Surveys on the Articles in Paragraph 143 of the Tariff Act of 1913* (Washington, 1931); and *United States vs. Aluminum Company of America*, 148 F. 2d 416, 411 (2d cir., 1945).

<sup>8</sup>George W. Stocking and Myron W. Walkins, *Cartels in Action* (New York, 1946), 216-273; L. Louis Marlio, *The Aluminum Cartel* (Washington, 1947).

<sup>9</sup>Wallace, *Market Control in the Aluminum Industry*, 537.



get anybody to use aluminum for anything."<sup>10</sup> Aluminum's newness was not the entire reason for its slow acceptance; the high monopoly price Alcoa maintained for it was also significant.

In an attempt to stimulate a demand for aluminum, Alcoa turned to the cookware industry. Late in 1889 or early in 1890, Captain Hunt proposed that the Avery Stamping Company, a general steel stamping company which also produced a line of stamped-steel cooking utensils, also stamp aluminum cookware. Hunt sent Avery sufficient sheet aluminum to produce between twenty and twenty-five hotel stew pots as an experiment. These pots were the first aluminum pans stamped in the United States, but the experiment proceeded no further. When Henry W. Avery asked Captain Hunt to give his company the exclusive right to manufacture cooking utensils from sheet aluminum, Hunt turned down his request.<sup>11</sup> Alcoa was interested only in the expansion of demand for aluminum and not in the privileged monopolies of others.

Then, at the turn of the century, Alcoa acquired a small aluminum cookware company in settlement of a debt. By 1901 the Aluminum Cooking Utensil Company (now Wear-Ever Aluminum, Inc.), a wholly owned subsidiary, had been organized to manufacture quality cookware at a premium price. In building a sales organization, A. V. Davis wrote to Charles Ziegler and John H. Wilson in Carlisle, Pennsylvania. These two men had begun, some years earlier, to sell enamel kettles to earn money to finance their education. Because of limited capital, they peddled their wares door to door. When some domestic stamped aluminum cookware came on the market during the early 1890's, Zieg-

ler and Wilson discovered that its lightness, resistance to corrosion, high conductivity to heat, good appearance, resistance to chipping or cracking, and ease of cleaning made it easy to sell—even though the price of aluminum was double or triple that of its most expensive competitors—if it could be demonstrated to the housewives.<sup>12</sup> It was this sales technique which they brought to the Aluminum Cooking Utensil Company; and house-to-house selling, combined with demonstrations, remained the most important method of merchandising aluminum cooking utensils until the twenties.<sup>13</sup>

Although some aluminum cookware was stamped during the last decade of the nineteenth century, the majority of the aluminum smelted by Alcoa was used in novelties—aluminum combs and lucky penny pocket pieces ("Keep me and never go broke").<sup>14</sup> In fact, what eventually became the Wisconsin aluminum cookware industry began as an aluminum novelty company.

**T**HE WISCONSIN PART of the cookware story began at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, with tough, raw-boned entrepreneur Joseph Koenig.<sup>15</sup> Koenig, had immigrated to the United States in the late 1860's with his recently widowed mother and his eight brothers and sisters. The family settled in Two Rivers, Wisconsin, 175 miles north of Chicago, and Koenig obtained employment at the Two Rivers Manu-

<sup>12</sup> The high import duties also kept foreign aluminum cookware out of the United States. But that did not secure the cookware market for domestic producers of aluminum cooking utensils. There were many substitutes available. Hence, each higher protective duty increased the disparity between the prices for aluminum cookware and its domestic substitutes. See 1897 *Sears Roebuck Catalogue* (New York, 1968), 130-136, for comparative cookware prices.

<sup>13</sup> Wear-Ever alone held from 80 to 30 per cent of this market before 1919. Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry*, 257. Some Wear-Ever cookware was sold to department stores and institutions.

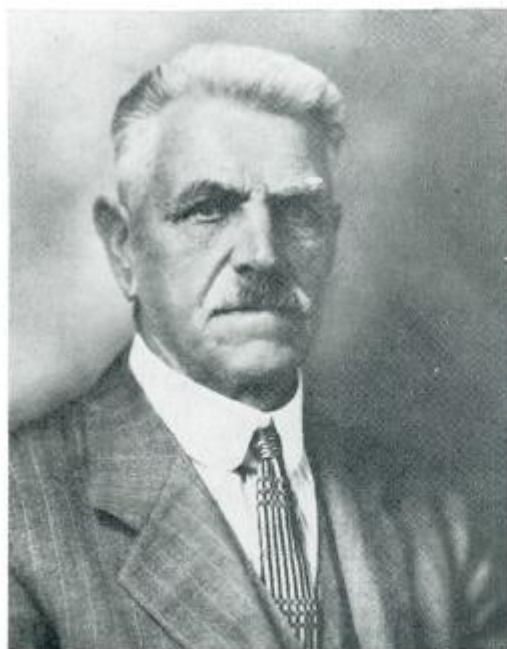
<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>15</sup> The major sources of information on Koenig's life are Louis Falge (ed.), *History of Manitowoc County, Wisconsin* (Chicago, 1912), 210-213; Mirro Aluminum Co., *Mixing Bowl* (July, 1955); and various other issues of the *Mixing Bowl*.

<sup>10</sup> Boyden Sparkes, "Shoot the Works!" in *The Saturday Evening Post*, (January 2, 1943). In the same vein Charles Hall, one of the pioneers in commercial production of aluminum, wrote to a friend in reference to the early days of the aluminum industry (1890's): "People have said we didn't have 1,000 pounds. They were wrong, but they might have said, that so far as users of aluminum were concerned, practically no one wanted 1,000 pounds." Carr, *Alcoa*, 109.

<sup>11</sup> Information on the Avery Stamping Company was obtained from the unpublished historical files of Alcoa.





Courtesy Mirro Aluminum Co.

*Joseph Koenig, founder of the Aluminum Manufacturing Company of Two Rivers, predecessor of the Mirro Aluminum Company.*

facturing Company, a woodworking concern. He was not content long to spend his time as a woodworker, and in 1872, at the age of fifteen, he left home to seek other employment. During the next twenty years he worked as a painter and decorator, a lawyer, a factory manager, a land speculator, and a teacher in the Midwest.

Late in 1892, his cousin Arthur Reymond asked him to act as the legal representative for a German aluminum novelty company which was going to exhibit at the exposition. Koenig, then a teacher in Chicago, accepted and when the exposition closed the following October, he purchased the remaining merchandise and exhibited it at fairs in San Francisco and St. Louis. He was gratified with the attention it attracted and amazed that he was able to sell everything at a good profit.

Heartened by the demand for aluminum novelties, Koenig began to think seriously about manufacturing them. While searching for risk capital and a production site, he returned to Two Rivers to visit his relatives. There he was introduced to J. E. Hamilton, owner of the Hollywood Type Company.<sup>10</sup>

Koenig was able to convince Hamilton that his idea—that aluminum novelties manufactured domestically could be produced and sold more cheaply than those imported—was feasible.

"I asked him," Mr. Hamilton recalled, "how he proposed to start his enterprise and if he had any capital. He said he had only \$300, but all he wanted was a small room to work in and enough power to operate his machines. I took him out in the factory and showed him a space about 20 feet square, with a shaft overhead from which he could take his power without charge, and to go ahead with his experimenting, and see what he could do."<sup>17</sup>

For the next two years Joseph Koenig worked virtually alone to perfect the machines, tools, and dies necessary for the manufacture of aluminum novelties. When Koenig began production he had two men filing the teeth of combs out of strips of aluminum, a slow and relatively costly process. Anxious to effect a more efficient procedure, Koenig set up a single, power-driven saw to cut out the combs' teeth, but soon he had a gang of saws rigged up to make the teeth in one cut. The gang saw, however, generated too much heat and the aluminum strip warped.

Koenig next devised a "drum arrangement with slots which would hold a hundred combs at a time; the drum being revolved against the saw, and then moved forward into position for the next cut after each revolution. This gave time to allow the metal to cool between cuts, and also provided for production in such quantities, with only one man to tend the machine, that the cost of each individual comb was reduced, in Mr. Hamilton's phrase, 'almost to nothing.'"<sup>18</sup>

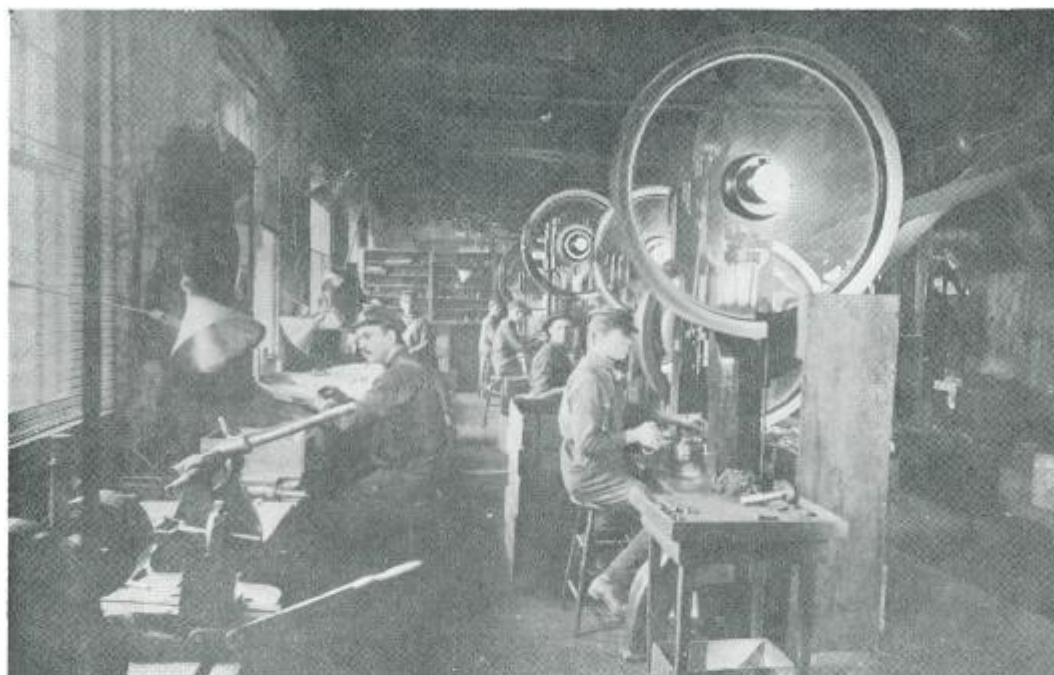
Along with the use of this and other of his inventions, Koenig's output of novelties rose rapidly while his unit cost fell substantially. He added trays, bicycle guards, key fobs, cigar cases, mustache cups, salt and pepper shakers, ash trays, and, of course, penny

<sup>10</sup> Hollywood was the kind of wood used to make the type.

<sup>17</sup> Byers, *Biography of J. E. Hamilton*, 77.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 78. The retail price of an aluminum pocket comb in 1897 was eight cents but by 1902 the price had fallen to four cents. 1897 *Sears Roebuck Catalogue*, 326, and 1902 *Edition of the Sears Roebuck Catalogue* (New York, 1969), 936.





Courtesy Mirro Aluminum Co.

*Workers making utensils in the Manitowoc Aluminum Novelty Company, early 1900's.*

pieces to his line and found the public eager to purchase novelties made from the new mystery metal. "When Koenig took his first manufactured articles to Chicago in 1895, he received orders for more goods in two hours than he could manufacture in three months."<sup>19</sup>

With sales increasing and the need for more capital and space becoming abundantly clear, Koenig incorporated the Aluminum Manufacturing Company in July of 1895 "for the purpose of manufacturing and selling useful and ornamental articles of aluminum, or of other materials or metals." The Bank of Two Rivers, controlled by J. E. Hamilton and his brother, lent Koenig \$500 on the condition that the Hamiltons receive a half interest in the company, with Koenig's half interest to be paid for out of earnings. The city of Two Rivers also provided an additional \$2,000 capital as an inducement to keep the company in the city.<sup>20</sup>

As the volume of business grew to annual sales of \$125,000 in the next few years, ad-

ministration and financial management became more important, but Koenig's interests remained with the mechanical and development departments. He found it difficult to delegate responsibility and that, combined with his irascible nature, caused some of his ablest men to look elsewhere for employment. Herman Schwab and Henry Meihnsner, skilled tool and die makers, quarreled with Koenig in 1898, were fired, and became important cogs in the establishment of a competing company, as did others in the years that followed.

Only seven miles away in Manitowoc, Wisconsin, a tannery owner watched Koenig's progress with anticipation. Henry Vits was being forced out of the tannery business by the cutthroat competition of the Leather Trust.<sup>21</sup> In 1898 Vits sold his thirty-four-year-

<sup>19</sup> Hubert R. Wentorf, "History of the Aluminum Industry of Wisconsin," (unpublished typescript, 1967), 15; Byers, *Biography of J. E. Hamilton*, 78-79; *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State*, 320.

<sup>21</sup> The major sources of information on the Vits family are Falge (ed.), *History of Manitowoc County*, 15-16, 18-21, 54-57; and Mirro Aluminum Co., *Mixing Bowl* (January, February, March, 1948, and July, 1955).

<sup>20</sup> *Wisconsin: A Guide to the Badger State* (2nd ed., New York, 1954), 320.



Courtesy Mirro Aluminum Co.

*Henry Vits, who abandoned the tannery business to found the Manitowoc Aluminum Novelty Company in 1898.*

old tannery business, and converted the building for use by the Manitowoc Aluminum Novelty Company, with Schwab and Meihssner as employees and the only non-Vits family stockholders.<sup>22</sup> Vits was an able administrator and soon Manitowoc Aluminum was challenging Aluminum Manufacturing for leadership of the Wisconsin aluminum novelty business.

Five years later, in 1903, another of Koenig's employees quit to start another company in Two Rivers to manufacture aluminum signs and other advertising novelties. Albert B. Leyse, who had been foreman of the buffing department for five years, convinced his dentist, Dr. E. J. Soik, to finance the Aluminum Sign Company. On March 31, the day before the sign company was formed, Koenig fired Norman Leyse, Albert's younger brother. Consequently, the Leyse brothers started in the aluminum sign business together, Albert as an unskilled tool and die maker and manager, and Norman as an equally unskilled printer.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Wentorf, "History of the Aluminum Industry of Wisconsin," 6.

In the winter of 1904-1905 the Aluminum Sign Company's need for more factory space to accommodate its expanding business and Kewaunee's need for a new economic base to replace the lumber industry coincided, and the city paid the company \$2,000 to move. Dr. Soik sold his interest in the company to Albert Leyse and a Kewaunee man for \$665.50. By late May, 1905, the factory was in operation in Kewaunee with thirteen workers. The company's success, on a relatively small scale, continued until World War I when the increase in aluminum novelty companies without a comparable increase in demand, the scarcity of aluminum, and the failure to obtain war contracts almost brought financial collapse.<sup>24</sup>

By the early 1900's Koenig's chief rivals were the Manitowoc Aluminum Novelty Company and the equally large if not slightly larger New Jersey Aluminum Novelty Company. These three companies were, by and large, the aluminum novelty industry in the United States, and each other's most important competitors.<sup>25</sup>

For the first six years of the new century, demand for aluminum novelties expanded as rapidly as production. However, the banking panic of 1907 quickly dried up consumer spending for nonessentials. When production of aluminum novelties continued, the market became glutted and the prices of novelties were repeatedly lowered to stimulate demand and, at times, to destroy competitors. Alcoa realized that it would lose sales if any one of the three major companies were forced into bankruptcy. Consequently, Alcoa acted to stop the price war and to effect a combi-

<sup>23</sup> The major sources of information on the Leyse brothers are *The Kewaunee Star*, March 2, 1960; *The Kewaunee Enterprise*, September 19, 1968; interview with Norman Leyse, July 21, 1967; and Leyse Aluminum Co., "Leyse Anniversary" (unpublished typescript, 1955).

<sup>24</sup> *The Kewaunee Enterprise*, April 17, 1903, May 26, June 2, 1905; A. B. Leyse, "Reminiscence Speech to Rotary" (unpublished typescript, 1945), 6; and the unpublished historical files of the Leyse Aluminum Company.

<sup>25</sup> The federal government charged in 1912 that these three novelty companies controlled over 70 per cent of that industry. See, U.S., Congress, House, Committee on Ways and Means, *Tariff Hearings*, H.R. Doc. No. 1447, 62 Congress, 3 session, vol. 2 schedule C, 1913, pp. 1527, 1532.





Courtesy Leyse Aluminum Co.

Norman Leyse (left) and his brother Albert, Kewaunee aluminum products manufacturers.

nation of these companies.<sup>26</sup> On December 10, 1908, the Manitowoc Aluminum Novelty Company, the Aluminum Manufacturing Company, and the New Jersey Aluminum Company were successfully consolidated as the Aluminum Goods Manufacturing Company (the present Mirro Aluminum Co.).<sup>27</sup>

Alcoa was generously repaid for its services as mediator, arbitrator, and financier. It received 25 per cent of the capital stock and was given a monopoly on the sale of sheet and ingot to Mirro.<sup>28</sup> In addition, after 1911, two of the six directors were Alcoa executives, and in 1914 an Alcoa accountant was made secretary-treasurer of the corporation. Between 1908 and 1912 Alcoa increased its financial interest in Mirro until it controlled over one-third of its stock, which it held until the early twenties.<sup>29</sup>

Because of the consolidation which formed Mirro, several other men employed by the Wisconsin companies decided to go into business for themselves. In 1909 Emil W. Krug,

a stockholder in Vit's company before the consolidation, and his brother Charles left Mirro to found a small aluminum jobbing shop in Manitowoc. Both men were skilled tool and die makers.<sup>30</sup> Their Aluminum Specialty Company, was not successful, and after five years the Krugs sold out to Walter E. Spindler. Spindler's interest in the aluminum novelty business was evoked by his father, Charles E. Spindler, who was one of the principals of Barnhart Brothers and Spindler of Chicago, the largest independent type foundry in the United States, and also an early stockholder of the J. E. Hamilton Hollywood Type Company. With the consolidation of Koenig's company into Mirro, Hamilton had become involved in its management as the new chairman of the board. Hamilton's enthusiasm for the aluminum novelty business was conveyed by Charles Spindler to his son.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 1528; U.S., Federal Trade Commission, *Report of the Federal Trade Commission on Home Furnishings Industries*, Vol. III, *Kitchen Furnishings and Domestic Appliances*, October 6, 1924 (Washington, 1925), 71.

<sup>27</sup> The actual incorporation of the company under the laws of the State of New Jersey did not take place until March 3, 1909. Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry*, 102-103.

<sup>28</sup> U.S., Department of Justice, *Report of William R. Benham on the Aluminum Company of America*, 69 Congress, 1 session, Senate Doc. No. 67 (Washington, 1926), 52; *Tariff Hearings*, 1528; *United States v. Aluminum Co. of America*, 148 F. 2d. 416, pp. 435-436. The percentages refer to stock held by Alcoa and its officers.

<sup>29</sup> Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry*, 248.

<sup>30</sup> The major source of information on the Krugs is Aluminum Specialty Co., *Annual Report*, 1955 (Manitowoc, 1956), 4.



Courtesy Mitro Aluminum Co.

A 1905 photograph of women polishing articles in the Manitowoc Aluminum Novelty Company factory.

Walter Spindler had been a partner in the Northern Wisconsin Produce Company, but while in Texas for three months in the winter and early spring of 1914 buying fresh produce, his partners had lost the firm considerable business through poor management. On his return to Manitowoc, he liquidated his holdings in the produce firm and with this capital and additional financial support from his wife's family he bought the Aluminum Specialty Company.

Spindler continued to operate the company as a jobber and independent manufacturer of aluminum specialties throughout World War I. Although he was a better manager than the Krugs, Spindler faced the same difficulties as did the Leyses and the rest of the industry during the war. Most of the aluminum companies that produced cookware, as well as novelties, fared better and were to benefit most when the consumer, with his accumulated forced savings, was released from wartime restrictions in late 1918.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> The major sources of information on Spindler are *ibid.*, and Louis Falge (ed.), *History of Manitowoc County*, 92-93.

ALTHOUGH ALUMINUM NOVELTIES consumed the bulk of virgin aluminum produced at the turn of the century, aluminum cookware became, within a few years, the leading use to which aluminum was put. After the Panic of 1907 the demand for aluminum cookware multiplied. Wear-Ever's campaign of demonstration and education was beginning to pay off. From 1908 to 1909 Wear-Ever's sales increased approximately 80 per cent, while at the same time the company held 80 per cent of the market.<sup>32</sup> However, virgin aluminum production was increasing even more rapidly; by 1914 utensils were using only one-third of the output.<sup>33</sup> During and after World War I many new uses of aluminum were found.<sup>34</sup> Consequently, cookware's share of the total market continued to fall, to 15 per cent for the first five years of the twenties.<sup>35</sup> Aluminum cookware's share of the kitchenware market, on the other hand, was growing during the same period.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the fledgling aluminum utensils industry probably represented less than 5 per cent of the total cookware market. By 1914 it was a major competitor, and by 1919 it was close to becoming the most important cookware.<sup>36</sup> In addition, the results of a questionnaire, circulated in the early twenties and reputed to cover a cross section of the United States, indicated that approximately 93 per cent of all housewives at the time preferred aluminum utensils.<sup>37</sup> However, the less expensive (enamel, iron, tin, and copper) wares constituted about 80 per cent of the cookware used, and more enamelware utensils were used than aluminum utensils.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry*, 251, 257.

<sup>33</sup> Wallace, *Market Control in the Aluminum Industry*, 60.

<sup>34</sup> Allied governments were reported to have used over 90,000 tons of aluminum in 1918.

<sup>35</sup> U.S., Department of Justice, *Report of William R. Benham*, 52.

<sup>36</sup> Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry*, 8, 45; U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Manufactures* (Washington, 1919).

<sup>37</sup> *A Short Story of Aluminum* (Manitowoc, ca. 1923), 10.

<sup>38</sup> U.S., Department of Justice, *Report of William R. Benham*, 23, 51.



The first Wisconsin company to specialize in producing aluminum utensils was the Standard Aluminum Company, also formed because of the consolidation. It was started in 1908 by Adolph Kummerow, who had quit his job as a foreman for Koenig because the new company was going to make him punch a clock like the rest of the help.<sup>39</sup> Up to this time there had been relatively little cookware manufactured by the Wisconsin companies; Kummerow changed all this. As the local paper reported: "He manufactures exclusively aluminum baking pans and cooking utensils and the special adaptability of this metal for this purpose, ensures the success of his enterprise. His field at present is the entire world and introduction of his wares is all that is necessary to bring them into general use."<sup>40</sup> By 1910 Kummerow's company had grown to the point where his brother-in-law, Herman Wentorf, left Mirro to join him.

The Standard Aluminum Company did not survive for long as an independent entity. It had constructed a rolling mill in 1913 and subsequently had imported its total aluminum ingot needs. The beginning of the war in 1914 heralded the end of aluminum sheet and ingot imports into the United States. Because it was unable to obtain Alcoa aluminum (only civilian customers who had been good prewar purchasers received quotas), its fate was sealed, and Standard Aluminum was soon forced to sell out to Mirro.

When Herman Wentorf moved from Mirro to Standard, the management of Mirro gave his brothers, Carl and Robert, an ultimatum: get Herman to return or be fired themselves.<sup>41</sup> Instead, they resigned and moved on to start still another aluminum cookware company. In the summer of 1911 the two Wentorf brothers learned that B. C. Ziegler and two other men from West Bend, Wisconsin, had toured the Standard Aluminum Company in search of a business to replace a leather goods factory which had been destroyed by fire.



Courtesy The West Bend Co.

*Bernhard Carl Ziegler, one of the original founders and long-time official of the West Bend Aluminum Company.*

The Wentorf brothers, who were experienced tool and die makers, contacted Ziegler; terms were discussed and agreed upon; and the necessary capital was raised, largely on the basis of the twenty-seven-year-old Ziegler's reputation as a business wizard.<sup>42</sup>

The West Bend Aluminum Company was organized on September 27, 1911. The company's new draw press was capable of stamping about fifteen different kinds of utensils, and it was decided to limit production to those "articles until business warrants branching out into the manufacture of novelties and numerous utensils."<sup>43</sup> The factory employed six to ten men at first, but growth came quickly. By 1914 a new factory had been built and in 1918 a large three-storey addition was

<sup>39</sup> The major source of information on Kummerow is Wentorf, "History of the Aluminum Industry of Wisconsin," 7-8.

<sup>40</sup> *The Two Rivers Chronicle*, July 7, 1908.

<sup>41</sup> Wentorf, "History of the Aluminum Industry of Wisconsin," 8.

<sup>42</sup> The major sources of information on Ziegler are Carl Quickert (ed.), *History of Washington County, Wisconsin, Past and Present* (Chicago, 1912), II: 114-116, 231-232; and the West Bend Aluminum Co., *The West Bend Story, 1911-1956* (West Bend, Wisconsin, 1957), 6-15. While still a high school student, Ziegler founded and ran his own full-fledged fire insurance company. B. C. Ziegler and Company is now larger than all the other firms in the institutional financing market combined. "Ziegler of West Bend," in *Let's See* (August, 1963), 16.

<sup>43</sup> *The West Bend News*, October 17, 1911.



Courtesy Leyse Aluminum Co.

A 1922 photograph of workers in the Leyse Aluminum Company of Kewaunee.

erected. Sears Roebuck and Company early became the most important single customer, accounting for between 40 and 50 per cent of West Bend's sales through 1919. Prior to the First World War, Sears, other mail-order houses, and jobbers purchased 90 per cent of its sales.<sup>44</sup> After the war West Bend introduced its line in department stores, but that market was dominated by Wear-Ever and Mirro.

Within two years after formation of Mirro, internal dissension arose between the Wisconsin and New Jersey interests. The western members wanted to produce aluminum cooking utensils while the eastern members did not feel the necessary capital investment would be profitable. Koenig and George Vits, Henry Vits' son, appealed to A. V. Davis of Alcoa and he agreed to help them buy out the New Jersey interests. George Vits was elected president and Koenig first vice-president.<sup>45</sup>

It was not until 1913 that Mirro began to produce cookware by the same mass produc-

tion method it employed in making novelties. The first utensil made that way was a double boiler to be used by the Quaker Oats Company as a premium in a national advertising campaign. While Wear-Ever continued to sell most of its cookware house to house, Mirro started with premium sales and the wholesale trade and slowly moved into the retail market. Franchises were obtained from many of the same companies that handled their novelties, but most of Mirro's cookware sales were made to jobbers, chain stores, and mail-order houses.

The Mirro Aluminum Company bought the Standard Aluminum Company in July, 1915, and began to concentrate on the production of cookware. In 1917 the company brought out a new high-quality line—Mirro, the Finest Aluminum—to improve its market position and its image. The Mirro line was sold directly to retailers only, and store franchises were soon one of the company's main sales outlets.

The Mirro Aluminum Company expanded its manufacturing space almost every year to keep up with its sales. In one exceptionally busy year, 1919, five large additions to the Manitowoc and Two Rivers plants were begun. The importance of the Mirro Aluminum Company to the industry before 1920 cannot be overemphasized. Until the early 1920's Mirro accounted for over 80 per cent of the aluminum utensils sold by Wisconsin companies.<sup>46</sup>

UP TO 1919 West Bend and Mirro were the only Wisconsin companies making aluminum cookware, but this was due to change. As was to be expected, the cessation of fighting in Europe caused a recession in those sectors of the economy producing war goods, while most civilian goods began selling briskly, especially aluminum utensils. In 1919 firms began to enter the aluminum cookware industry at an almost unbelievable rate, five of them in Wisconsin alone.<sup>47</sup> Two

<sup>46</sup> Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry*, 128.

<sup>47</sup> There were estimated to be thirty-five firms in the stamped aluminum cookware industry in 1923. Approximately twenty-five of the firms entered the industry between 1919 and 1921. *Ibid.*, 10-15.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with J. R. Brown, December 27, 1965.

<sup>45</sup> Wentorf, "History of the Aluminum Industry of Wisconsin," 9.



of the Wisconsin companies had previously manufactured aluminum novelties. The Aluminum Sign Company changed its name to Leyse Aluminum Company to reflect its diversification of production, and distributed its cookware solely through independent hardware dealers as a way of instilling dealer loyalty.<sup>48</sup> The Aluminum Specialty Company also began producing cookware. The F. W. Woolworth Company initially contacted Mirro to build a plant to be used exclusively for the production of the chain store's aluminum utensil and novelty needs. When Woolworth rejected Mirro's counter offer of a special department, rather than a new plant, for their exclusive use, Walter Spindler of Aluminum Specialty moved into the stalemate. His offer to build a plant in Chilton, Wisconsin, was accepted by Woolworth.<sup>49</sup>

Prohibition soon gave Wisconsin its fifth aluminum cookware company. The Rosenheimer Malt and Grain Company of Kewaskum was a profitable enterprise with a dim future. The Eighteenth Amendment was ratified by three-fourths of the states on January 16, 1919, and was to go into effect in one year, but because of the wartime food control act the manufacture of beer actually ended on May 1, 1919. Adolph Rosenheimer, Sr., the owner of the malt plant, had already begun to look for another profitable investment.<sup>50</sup> Rosenheimer enticed Al Hron and Arthur Manthei, the Wentorfs' assistants at West Bend, to help set up the Kewaskum Aluminum Company "in a rented building just as Ziegler and two Wentorfs had done at West Bend eight years earlier."<sup>51</sup> On October 4, 1919, the fifth and final successful Wisconsin company was incorporated, and shortly thereafter it too began to produce aluminum cookware.

The other two companies that began production in 1919 were both located in Sheboy-

gan and both left the industry before 1925. Polar Ware Company, a spin-off of the Vollrath Company, an old name in enamelware, was organized in 1908. Shortly after 1923 Polar Ware abandoned the manufacture of aluminum utensils because it had become unprofitable. The second company, the Sheboygan Aluminum Company, was a complete failure. Robert Stegeman left Mirro in 1919 to manage it. The company never was very successful; five years later the plant was closed and the equipment was sold at auction, paradoxically, to an Ohio enamelware manufacturer.<sup>52</sup>

By 1920 the United States aluminum cookware industry was concentrated in two areas—eastern Ohio-western Pennsylvania, and eastern Wisconsin. There were no companies south of the Ohio River and only three small companies west of the Mississippi River. The total utensils industry, other than aluminum, was concentrated in the more heavily populated northeastern region of the United States.<sup>53</sup>

In the early years the Wisconsin companies were at a slight cost disadvantage because of their greater distance from Alcoa. In 1915, however, Alcoa changed its pricing formula from F.O.B. pricing at shipping point to F.O.B. pricing at shipping point, carload freight allowed. In essence the change meant that Alcoa would bear the transport cost for companies which purchased aluminum in lots of at least 500 pounds. Consequently, the cost of aluminum was equalized to all the relatively large companies.<sup>54</sup> The cost of

<sup>48</sup> This was not the first failure for Stegeman. In 1911 he had left Mirro with several other men to manage a plant financed by the community of Mauston, Wisconsin. Eighteen months later, when additional capital was needed, the financial backers balked. Stegeman returned to Two Rivers to work for the Standard Aluminum Company and, subsequently, again for Mirro.

<sup>49</sup> Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry*, 17; U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Manufactures* (Washington, 1929).

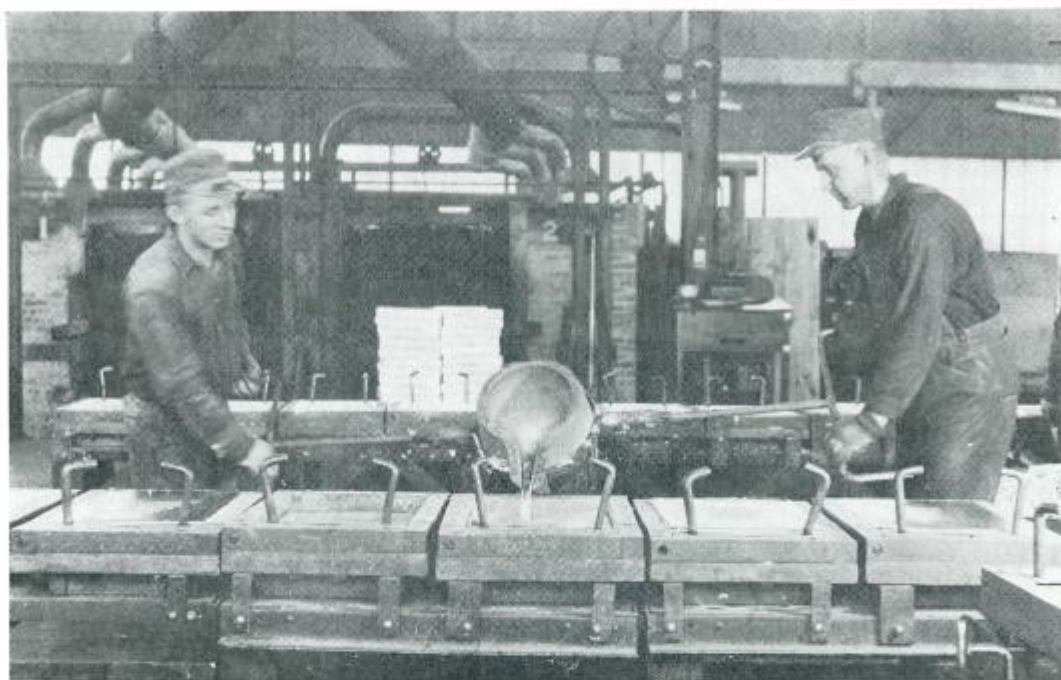
<sup>50</sup> American Metal Market, *Metal Statistics* (1965 ed., New York, 1965), 541; Aluminum Company of America, "General Instructions" (unpublished company files, dated September 13, 1930, and March 25, 1940). Companies west of the Mississippi River were only allowed the carload rate of freight to St. Louis. The sheet aluminum was shipped mainly by rail.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Norman Leyse, July 21, 1967.

<sup>49</sup> Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry*, 116.

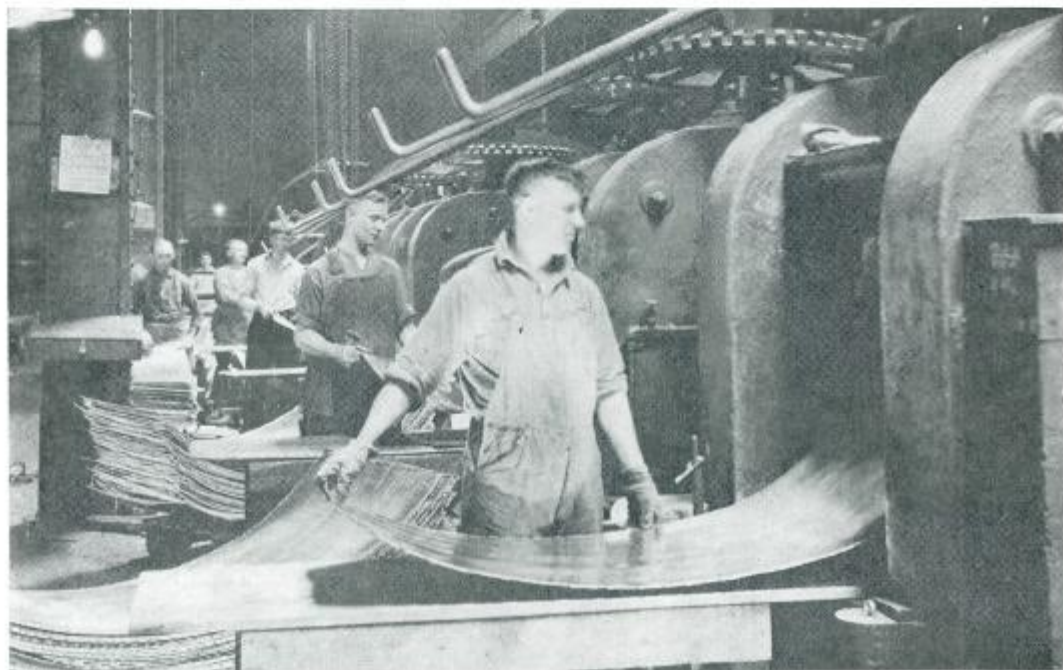
<sup>50</sup> The major sources of information on Adolph Rosenheimer are Dean H. Roe, "The Kewaskum Aluminum Company" (unpublished typescript, September, 1967); Quickert (ed.), *History of Washington County*, 299-301, 346-347; and *Kewaskum Statesman*, May 1, 1926.

<sup>51</sup> Roe, "The Kewaskum Aluminum Company," 11.



Photos courtesy Mirro Aluminum Co.

*These pictures show workers in the early 1920's in the Mirro Aluminum plant in Two Rivers. (Above) aluminum is being cast into slabs by hand; (below) the metal being flat-sheet rolled by hand, a process since outmoded.*





shipping aluminum utensils was a smaller share of retail prices than for nonaluminum competitors, because aluminum utensils were relatively expensive and the most desired cookware. In addition, it was marketed in ways which minimized transportation costs; for example, its light weight made it feasible to ship by mail which charged only by weight and not by volume.

All labor costs, on the other hand, were relatively low because of the decline of the lumber industry. The lack of skilled labor never became an important barrier. Koenig and Albert Leyse taught themselves the fundamentals of tool and die making; the rest of the companies began operations with tool and die makers on their payrolls. Likewise, the capital requirement was not a difficult barrier to success; for the Aluminum Manufacturing Company (1895) it was 20 feet of factory space, free power, and little else; for the West Bend Aluminum Company (1911) and the Kewaskum Aluminum Company (1919) it was \$7,000 and \$125,000 respectively.<sup>55</sup>

The high price of aluminum was a barrier to success that was faced by every manufacturer of aluminum products. Alcoa, in common with many firms, was faced with the perpetual problem of how to maximize its profits, but in the context of a monopolist in an industry where entry was difficult. Alcoa's solution appeared to be to set a price for ingot aluminum, taking all factors into consideration, that would maintain its share of the domestic market at over 90 per cent.<sup>56</sup> It is impossible to say whether or not Alcoa's pricing maximized its profits in the short run. But over the long run Alcoa was very successful in maintaining its domestic monopoly, a more important consideration as far as Alcoa was concerned.

In retrospect, the aluminum cookware industry reduced the high price barrier by educating housewives through house-to-house can-

vassing and demonstrations and giving free samples as premiums. A second way of reducing the price barrier had a positive effect only in the short run. After World War I the thickness of the aluminum utensils was reduced by some companies until the lower aluminum cost made its price competitive. This thin cookware (one-hundredth of an inch thick) was only a temporary help and later a hindrance because of its short useful life.<sup>57</sup> Aluminum cookware manufacturers were especially affected by Alcoa's continual effort to establish a higher price for aluminum, because all the competitive cooking utensils were made of cheaper materials. The supply and, accordingly, the demand for aluminum cookware were closely tied to the price of aluminum because of the large share of total cost, approximately 25 per cent, it constituted.<sup>58</sup>

The potential demand for aluminum utensils was also reduced somewhat by antialuminum propaganda. Antialuminum propaganda, spread by competitive cookware manufacturers, attacked aluminum cookware as poisonous, as provocative of cancer, and as a cause of sterility. These attacks were not repudiated systematically until after 1920.<sup>59</sup> But by 1920 the potential barriers which had made Wisconsin an unlikely location for the aluminum manufacturing industry had been successfully negotiated by five companies, and their future success was assured.

Success, however, did not spoil Joseph Koenig. Always the resolute, but irascible, entrepreneur, he did not allow his duties as vice-president and director of Mirro to stop him from organizing several other companies, among them the Metal Ware Corporation to manufacture nickel-plated copper cooking utensils. Nor did he mellow with age. After running in Two Rivers' mayoral race and losing, he expressed his displeasure by building his retirement home in Manitowoc.

<sup>55</sup> Rock, *The Wisconsin Aluminum Cookware Industry*, 111n., 117.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 82, 273.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 171-175.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 309-313.



# WISCONSIN

*magazine of history*

WINTER 2003-2004



## Wisconsin's Painted Past

An Immigrant's  
Anguish

West by  
Orphan Train





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The Wisconsin Historical Society does not assume responsibility for statements made by contributors. ISSN 0043-6643. Periodicals postage paid at Madison, WI 53706-1482. Back issues, if available, are \$10 plus postage (888-748-7479). Microfilm copies are available through University Microfilms, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106.

**On the front cover:** In this detail from *House Party*, folk artist Lavern Kammerude captures the spirit of a rural Wisconsin community's celebration. See page 41 for a full view of the party. WHS image ID 2717



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*En route to new homes in the West, a trainload of children pause to stretch their legs and to pose for the photographer.*





The Kansas State Historical Society

# West *by* Orphan Train

*By Clark Kidder*

Anyone who has been touched by an adoption in recent years knows of the intense complexity of the situation, and the ongoing balance of rights and protection for everyone involved—the children, the adoptive and birth parents, grandparents, and other family. Between the legal negotiations, the extended travel, and the seemingly endless waiting, it seems impossible that there was a time in our state's history when children of all ages arrived in town, with just a few weeks' notice, seeking homes and families. From 1854 and 1929, about 150,000 youngsters, and even a few adults, were part of a program known then as *placing out*. While the trains these children traveled on were often referred to as "baby trains" and "mercy trains" in their day, they are now known as the orphan trains. By 1910 the Children's Aid Society of New York City, a leader among the charitable institutions that used the nation's railways to deliver sought-after children to the country's Midwest, reported that they had sent

2,750 children and poor families to new homes in Wisconsin according to its annual report of the same year.

While doing genealogical research on my family in the 1980s, I learned that my paternal grandmother, Emily (Reese) Kidder, was an orphan train rider. During her lifetime, 1892–1986, my grandmother would often speak of living in a Brooklyn, New York, orphanage, and then being brought west on a train by a Seventh-Day Adventist minister named H. D. Clarke. It was not until I received informa-

tion from the Orphan Train Heritage Society of America in 1989, however, that I began to understand that my grandmother was a part of something so big. Unfortunately, it was not until after her death that I discovered many of the unspoken chapters of her own story, beginning with the revelation that she was not an orphan at all, but abandoned at the age of eight, by her parents, Lewis and Laura (Scott) Reese when they legally separated.

The term “orphan train” is misleading, as the majority of the children, like my grandmother, were not true orphans. This term gained wider use only after CBS ran a fictional miniseries about the topic in the 1970s, according to Stephen O'Connor in his book, *The Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles Loring Brace and the Children He Saved and Failed*. In many cases, one or both parents were still alive, but simply unable to care for their children, for reasons such as spousal desertion and destitution. Many children came from institutions in New York, deemed juvenile delinquents although one must consider nineteenth- and early twentieth-century criteria for delinquency and bad behavior. Wisconsin's *Blue Book* for 1885 delineated five reasons a minor girl should be an



Courtesy of the author

*Placing agent H. D. Clarke and his assistant Anna Laura Hill ushered this group of children to Hopkinton, Iowa, March 15, 1905. Emily Reese traveled with this group as far as Chicago, where she was placed in her first of many homes.*

“inmate” of the Industrial School for Girls and gave equal weight to girls who were simply “stubborn and unruly” as to those who were “viciously inclined.” “Truants, vagrants, and beggars” were also deemed “proper subjects” for the school. Those in danger of vice and immorality and those who had committed adult crimes rounded out the list. Children came to live in charitable and reformatory institutions by any type of action, their own or a parent's, that made them dependent, dangerous, or both.

In New York, things were much the same. My grandmother and her older brother Richard, the last of ten children, came into the care of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children in 1900. This institution soon transferred them to an orphanage called the Home for Destitute Children, in Brooklyn, where a family adopted Richard in 1902. Emily, however, was to spend six long years of her life at the orphanage. In 1906 Emily was transferred to the Elizabeth Home for Girls, a reform school for so-called “incorrigible girls.” Not long after she arrived, the school placed Emily with a woman “for training” of a general nature but that tenure was brief. At the age of thirteen, Emily then came into the custody of the Children's Aid Society, and on March 13 of that year she boarded an orphan train bound for Hopkinton, Iowa.

The program known as *placing out* began with the Children's Aid Society of New York City, founded by Charles Loring Brace, although other organizations soon took up the practice. Each agency adopted its own placing out policies, but in all cases trains were used to transport the children to their new homes. Nearly every state in the Union received



these children, but the midwestern states were especially popular. The focus on them reflects the philosophy of Brace and others who believed fervently that city life and its industrial environment was the direct cause of the problems that their young charges faced. Annette R. Fry, in her book, *The Orphan Trains*, quotes Charles Loring Brace in describing his ideal, "The best of all asylums for the outcast child is the farmer's home." The agricultural communities of the midwestern frontier were by far the most attractive to New York's charitable societies.

Typically, the different societies rounded up groups ranging from six to more than one hundred children from the streets and orphanages of the big cities, bathed the children, fitted them with new clothes and shoes, sometimes gave them each a bible, and then sent them on the trains to new, unknown homes. In the case of the Children's Aid Society, advertisements were placed in local newspapers in the destination communities, where a committee, established approximately two weeks prior to the arrival of the train, would handle the necessary arrangements for the children's arrival, especially posting bills and helping the agents determine the best matches. On the scheduled arrival date, prospective foster parents would come from as far as thirty miles away to take their pick of a new son or daughter.

My grandmother's journey started out similarly to other children's, but, according to Aid Society records, her initial placement was unique. Like everyone in her group, she would have been bathed and given new clothes. All the children were allowed to take a few keepsakes with them, but Emily had only one: a small round brass brooch, with a photo of her father, Lewis Reese. Her group left the offices of the United Charities Building by streetcar around noon, and then crossed by ferry to the New Jersey shore. Here, they boarded a special car on the train. The railroads often provided special cars and free passes for the transportation of the children. During the journey, the children were fed sandwiches and would sleep in their seats.

The trip from New York to Chicago required a full day and night. Upon reaching Chicago's Union Station, the groups changed trains, bound for a specific region and the children's new homes. In my grandmother's case, however, Rev. H. D. Clarke, the placing agent, had received a letter from a couple, Mr. and Mrs. C. U. Parker, who were interested in taking a girl into their home. The Parkers met the group at the train station, as Clarke had requested, in order to meet the children and see if any of the girls interested them. After the couple had conversed with the group for some time, Emily stepped forward and declared that she would like to go live with them. Rev. Clarke consented, and while the remaining children boarded a train for Iowa, Emily went home with the Parkers.

After arriving in Hopkinton, Iowa, Clarke penned a letter to the Aid Society on Hotel Hopkinton stationery. It read in part:

*Mr. And Mrs. Parker met us at Union Station. He has no children. He is a fine Christian man, and wife of excellent family. He is city inspector of walks. Mr. Parker is a well-educated man and I have read fine articles from his pen. If there is any hitch about this procedure, let me know. Emily will have good advantages and refined and Christian influences if she stays in that home. I know as yet, nothing of Emily's disposition.*

My grandmother's initial placement was an uncommon one, for most children remained on the trains until they reached their scheduled destinations. Once a train arrived in a town, generally in the morning, the children would be marched over to the courthouse, or the stage of an opera house, where the agents would line them up, often telling the children to sing, dance, or otherwise perform for the audience. The placing agent would speak to the crowd, and at the end of his speech, he would call each child forward, giving the child's name, nationality, traits, and any other background information. The agent then invited prospective foster parents to inspect the children, in the same manner in which they'd inspect cattle: publicly, critically, and without any sense of the child's feelings. The group would adjourn for the morning, and any interested parties would return for an afternoon session where the local committee would assist in placing the children. Children who were not chosen remained in town for several days, while the agent inspected the homes of the new foster parents, and conducted follow-up visits with children who they had previously placed in the area.

The New York Foundling Hospital, a Catholic-run organization, decided upon foster parents prior to sending the children west on the train. The hospital assigned each child a number, and sewed the name of the new foster parents into the child's collar. The Children's Aid Society usually placed Protestant children in Protestant homes, and the Foundling Hospital placed Catholic children in Catholic homes. The Foundling Hospital sent a great many children to Wisconsin as well. In its annual report for 1898, one religious sister wrote: "We arrived in Wisconsin with our twenty-five little charges to find their good foster papas and mamas awaiting our coming. We systematically gave out the children to the persons for whom they were destined except two, whose would-be parents, misunderstanding the time of our arrival, missed us. These little ones were quickly asked for by lookers-on who, it seemed, were nearly 1,000 in number."

Although references to "papas and mamas" occur throughout the records of the various agencies, all of the documents used in the various states indicate that these societies

# HOMES WANTED FOR CHILDREN

.....

A Company of Orphan Children of Different  
Ages Will Arrive In Mapleton, Iowa.

## Thursday, June 16

The Distribution will take place  
at Opera House at 10:30 a. m.

.....

The object of the coming of these children is to find homes in your midst, especially among farmers, where they may enjoy a happy and wholesome family life, where kind care, good example and moral training will fit them for a life of self-support and usefulness. They come under the auspices of the New York Children's Aid Society, by whom they have been tested and found to be well meaning and willing boys and girls.

The conditions are that they shall be properly clothed and treated as members of the family, sent to school according to the school law of the state, and remain in the family until they are eighteen years of age. At the expiration of the time specified it is hoped that arrangements can be made whereby they be able to remain in the family indefinitely. The society retains the right to remove a child at any time for just cause, and agrees to remove any found unsatisfactory after being notified.

Applications may be made to some of the following well known citizens who have agreed to act as local committee to aid the agent in securing homes:

W. H. CHRISMAN, J. E. SCOTT, H. F. NOURSE, L. N. PENNE, J. R. WELCH, T. B. LUTZ, P. GRIFFIN, H. S. GILLESPIE.

.....

If the Children are not all taken at 10:30 a. m.  
an adjourned meeting will be held at 1:30 p. m.

.....

## REMEMBER THE TIME AND PLACE

Come Out and Hear the Address.

.....

## H. D. CLARKE, Agt.

Courtesy of the author

*The dawn on new ones, or "dodgers" that ran in local Midwestern communities described the procedures the orphan trains followed when they arrived in town, and the conditions under which the children would be "placed out." But, legal adoption was only one of many options.*

dependent child might strike us as repugnant today, but it was an accepted and legal practice in Wisconsin and eleven other states until 1927. According to *The History of the State Board of Control of Wisconsin*, Wisconsin allowed older children who were residents of the state industrial school to work for private individuals in exchange for their support and maintenance. Although Wisconsin and neighboring states restricted private organizations like the Children's Aid Society with an increasing number of rules and conditions over time, the orphan trains kept coming.

Overall, it appears that children younger than their teenage years could hold some reasonable expectation of being fully adopted, that is, accepted emotionally and legally as a family member. Teenagers were more likely to be treated as "help" and had to earn their keep although allowed some time to attend school. Both the general requirements posted on fliers and the specific terms of the contracts the adults signed reflect these expectations. One of Clarke's general fliers reads, in part: "these children shall be properly clothed, treated as members of the family, given proper school advantages, and remain in the family until they are eighteen years of age." But the contracts were more specific (the terms for girls were similar with some difference in age requirements):

*Terms on Which Boys are Placed in Homes*  
*Applications must be endorsed by the Local Committee.*

*Boys under 15 years of age, if not legally adopted, must be retained as members of the family and sent to school according to the Educational Laws of the State, until they are 18 years old. Suitable provision must then be made for their future.*

*Boys 15 years of age must be retained as members of the family and sent to school during the winter months until they are 17 years old, when a mutual arrangement may be made.*

*Boys over 16 years of age must be retained as members of the family for one year, after which a mutual arrangement may be made.*

*Parties taking boys agree to write to the Society at least once a year, or to have the boys do so.*

*Removals of boys proving unsatisfactory can be arranged through the Local Committee or an Agent of the Society, the party agreeing to retain the boy a reasonable length of time after notifying the Society of the desired change.*

*If for any reason, the child has to be removed from the household, the Children's Aid Society does it at its own expense.*

Agents had the responsibility to check annually on the home life of the placed out children, removing them from situations where either the child or the parents were unhappy or dissatisfied. If the agent did not arrive in a timely manner to remove a child, the child would often run away to escape abuse, and both abuse and the act of running away appeared



to be quite common. Clarke noted in one of his many reports that, "an orphan's faults are magnified above others," and recorded one case where a child was cast away from his foster home for "dipping his finger in the jelly jar." Another child was sent away for "swatting too many flies," an act that displayed too much aggression. Knowing the difficulties and potential abuse that awaited so many of the children, the Children's Aid Society discouraged the placement of siblings in the same household, for Society leaders feared any existing feuds would provide foster parents with a built-in excuse to have them removed. One of the great tragedies of the orphan trains is that many children were not allowed to have any further contact with family or friends.

My grandmother's separation from her siblings occurred long before she boarded the train west, but she, like many others, had to be placed several times over. Her first placement, with the Parkers, came to an end at the end of the summer of 1906, just months after her arrival. Clarke, on his return from placing the remainder of the children in her group, visited the Parker home on April 9 and found it acceptable, reporting it to be a "very pretty home. Mr. Parker built it and owns it. Has lived there about 13 years. Solid man. Home well furnished. I think girl better suited than with average farm boys in the home on farm. Thus far she has pleased them and is quiet and modest and says she will do her best to keep such a good home and kind friends. Calls them uncle and aunt. Mrs. Parker seems to have tact. But of course, time must tell the story."

Unfortunately, by the end of the summer, Mrs. Parker had developed serious health problems, and the Parkers gave up Emily. From August 1906 through April 1910 H. D. Clarke placed Emily in five more homes, totaling six different foster homes across three different states in just four years. The Pelham family of Malone, Iowa found her quarrelsome and "saucy." The Browns of Le Claire, Iowa, according to a 1908 report "robbed her of the years' school and her clothes," meaning they did not send her to school for the year or provide her with new clothes as they'd agreed to do. The Kellogg family of Lansing, Iowa, then took Emily, and she wrote positively, if not grammatically, to Clarke about her life on December 26, 1908:

Dear Sir—

*I received your letter quite a while ago but did not answer. I go to school with the children that I live with. I stay at home and help with the work. I have not any photograph to sent. We live 2½ miles south east of Waukon. I do not know of the future years what I am going to do. I think I will be a dressmaker. I believed I will start to sew next summer. Well, I will close this time.*

*Your Truly,  
Emily Reese*

The Kelloggs planned to move to Wisconsin in 1909 and although they sought and received the necessary consent from



Courtesy of the author

*In spite of her tumultuous childhood, the author's grandmother, Emily Reese, survived ill-treatment and indifference.*

Clarke to take Emily with them, later in the year they contacted Clarke, requesting him to remove her. The family attended a Seventh-Day Adventist Camp in nearby Waukon, Iowa, taking Emily along but with no intention of bringing her home with them, according to Clarke's report. Clarke took her from Waukon and placed her in her first Wisconsin home on September 1, 1909, with the Mikkelsen family in Milton Junction. My grandmother didn't know it at the time, but she would live nearly all the rest of her life in the Milton



Courtesy of the author

*Unwashed and barely dressed in ill-fitting tattered clothing, these two boys were taken in by the Children's Aid Society.*



Courtesy of the author

*The same two boys appear cheerful after a bath and a haircut. They are likely wearing the first new clothes they have ever owned.*



Courtesy of the author

*The innocence and vulnerability of childhood is displayed in the face of John Knapton.*



Courtesy of the author

*H. D. Clarke worked briefly for the child society in Ohio, where he tried to place Samuel Fitzes with an African American family. The mother refused him because he was "too black" and his hair was "too curly." Clarke brought young Samuel back home to Cincinnati.*



WHS Name File

*Thomas Jefferson Cunningham, placed out in 1869, became the Mayor of Chippewa Falls in the 1890s and served as Wisconsin Secretary of State from 1891-1895.*



area. Her final foster home was with a nearby family, the Courtneys. I am aware of two additional times when Clarke heard from my grandmother. Once when she asked him to help her buy books for a nursing course, and again when she wrote him a brief but happy postcard dated March 8, 1912:

*Dear friend,  
Received your last letter some time ago will answer soon. I thought I would let you know that I am expected to be married the 27th of this mo. To Mr. Earl Kidder of course you will be surprise.  
Emily Reese*

At the age of seventeen, Emily Reese married Earl Kidder and ended her orphan days. Both of Earl's parents and his four siblings became Emily's new family, and she and Earl would celebrate seventy-four years of marriage, welcome seven children (one of whom died at birth), and survive the Depression, World War II, and the everyday troubles of farm life in southern Wisconsin.

Emily was not the only orphan train child to live a happy, productive adult life. One of the most successful children sent to Wisconsin was Thomas Jefferson Cunningham, who became mayor of Chippewa Falls in the 1880s and later served as Wisconsin Secretary of State. A prominent figure in Democratic party circles, Cunningham was a friend to three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, and a delegate to seventeen national political conventions, serving as the oldest delegate at the 1940 convention where Franklin D. Roosevelt was re-nominated. Although his April 28, 1941, obituary in Madison's daily newspaper, *The Capital Times*, makes no mention of Cunningham's arrival in Wisconsin as an orphan train rider, the Children's Aid Society maintained files on him and its 1887 annual report contained these entries; first, a copy of a letter replying to a query from New York:

#### A Poor Boy Became MAYOR

Dear Sir:

I have just received the information that you asked me to get for you about the young man sent to Wisconsin through your Society. His name is Thomas C—, Chippewa Falls, Wis., one of the party who went when my brother went. He has been mayor, also a member of the Legislature.

Yours respectfully,  
F. Osterwald

Second was this description of Cunningham's early years in Wisconsin:

Thomas C—, Age 15, Orph. Am. Goes West with Mr. Fry, August 10, 1869. Placed with R. J—, Stoughton, Wis. Wrote to him Jan. 26, 1870. —No reply. Wrote to him Sept., 1870.

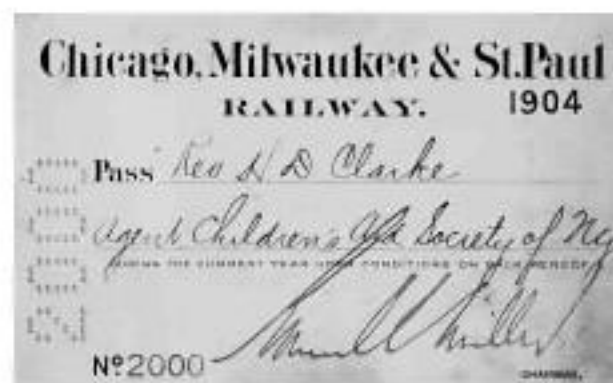


All photographs on this page are courtesy of the author

*Emily Reese found stability when she married Earl Kidder March 20, 1912, and found a new family that would never abandon her.*



*The only personal item Emily Reese carried with her on the orphan train was this brooch with a picture of her father, Louis. She kept it close to her for over eighty years.*



Different railroad companies, like the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul, issued special passes to placing agents and set aside entire rail cars for large groups of children.

—No reply. Wrote to him April, 1871.—No reply. Wrote to him Sept., 1871.—No reply. Wrote to him March 12, 1872. In reply, Mr. R. J.— writes (March 26, 1872) that Thomas C.—left him, and went to work in a printing office, where he worked for some time; saw him some time over a year ago. He was working in Boscobel, soliciting orders for cards, &c.

Never heard from him since.

As early as Cunningham's arrival in the 1870s, the system of placing out came under close scrutiny, and at times criticism, from the philanthropic world. H. H. Giles from Wisconsin's Board of Charities and Reform commented on the influx of boys from New York in his annual report for 1875, "our friends in . . . New York have contributed to the population of [the industrial] school [for boys in Waukesha]. . . . While we cannot resist the bringing among us of these street waifs, we can and do most earnestly protest against it." Although this board and its successors would continue to protest over the decades, state law would not officially prohibit the importation or exportation of children between Wisconsin and other states until the passage of the Children's Code, 48.42 in 1929.

At the same time Wisconsin had been pushed into the national limelight, criticized by the National Children's Bureau for its practice of child indenture, and pressured to find "more intelligent child care services." A study in the publication, *School and Society*, that same year cited children who were "worked virtually as unpaid servants in households and on farms, often deprived of schooling and . . . sometimes cruelly treated."

By 1929 the last of the orphan trains rolled down the tracks.

Seventy years later, I returned to my grandmother's native city and visited the Children's Aid Society, and to my amazement, they still had a rather plump file on my grandmother, including a letter from a Reese cousin, searching for records on Emily, which opened up a whole new line of family research.

More amazing to me was discovering that a woman in my hometown of Milton was the widow of Reverend H. D. Clarke's grandson. She had in her possession three of seven hand-typed leather bound volumes with extensive records of the children Clarke had placed over his decades with the Children's Aid Society. His journals and scrapbooks were filled with vivid descriptions of the children, as well as photos and transcripts of their letters. In addition, birth, marriage, and death dates were included for a good number of them, as well as information on who took the children, and how they made out in life. I knew that the records and photographs needed to be preserved for posterity, so after locating all but one of the seven, I gathered all the information together in a single book, which was published in 2001 by Heritage Books, and titled, *Orphan Trains and Their Precious Cargo: The Life's Work of Rev. H. D. Clarke*.

During the process of uncovering the facts of my grandmother's life, I've come to realize how very fortunate those children are that grow up in a stable household, with the love and nurturing of their parents, and extended family. Perhaps some of the readers of this article will be able to "connect" one of their family members to the orphan trains, and will also be able to be a part of this fascinating chapter in America's history.



Courtesy of the author  
Charles Loring Bruce, founder of the Children's Aid Society. His organization sought to move thousands of children from urban poverty to hopeful futures in the rural Midwest.

### Orphan Train Destinations in Wisconsin



Graphic by Joel Heiman

### About the Author

Clark Kidder resides in rural Wisconsin where he and his wife Linda and sons Robby and Nathan farm two hundred acres of land. He is a freelance writer and has authored several books, including *A Genealogy of the Wood Family*. (Family Tree Publishers, 2003). Clark has traced his Kidder roots back to 1320 in Maresfield, Sussex, England. He is currently serving as Vice President on the Board of Directors of the Milton House Museum, a National Landmark located in Milton, Wisconsin. He is also Director of the Wisconsin Orphan Train Research Center.





# Finding Records of Orphan Train Riders

## By Mail

Brooklyn Nursery and Infant's Hospital  
c/o Salvation Army  
Foster Home and Adoption Services  
233 East 17th Street  
New York, NY 10003

Children's Aid Society  
Office of Closed Records  
Attention: Victor Remer  
150 East 45th Street  
New York, NY 10017

Home for the Friendless  
(Established by The American Female  
Guardian Society—Founded in 1834)  
Records are being indexed by:  
The Orphan Train Heritage Society of  
America  
614 E. Emma Avenue, Suite 115  
Springdale, AR 72764-4634

New York Juvenile Asylum—Founded in 1851  
c/o Children's Village  
Office of Alumni Affairs  
Dobbs Ferry, NY 10522

Five Points House of Industry  
c/o Greer-Woodycroft and Hope Farm  
Mr. Mark Lukens, Director  
Crystal Run Village  
RD 2, Box 98  
Middletown, NY 10940

Brooklyn Home for Children—Since 1921  
(formerly The Home for Destitute Children—  
Founded in 1884)  
c/o Forestdale, Inc.  
67-35 112th Street  
Forest Hills, NY 11375-2349  
Open Monday through Friday (9–5 p.m.)

New England Home for Little Wanderers  
850 Boylston Street, Suite 201  
Chestnut Hill, MA 02167

New York Child's Foster Home Services (for  
Sheltering Arms and Speedwell records)  
c/o Sheltering Arms  
122 East 29th Street  
New York, NY 10016

New York Infant Asylum (merged in 1910 with  
New York Nursery and Child's Hospital)  
c/o Mrs. Adele Lerner  
Medical Archives  
New York Hospital Cornell Medical Center  
1300 York Avenue  
New York, NY 10021

Orphan Train Heritage Society of America  
614 East Emma Avenue, Suite 115  
Springdale, AR 72764-4634  
PH: 479-756-2780  
FAX: 479-756-0769  
E-mail: othsa@msn.com  
Website: <http://www.orphantrainriders.com>  
(Publishes a quarterly, has documented information on over 10,000 riders, and sponsors orphan train rider reunions)

New York Foundling Hospital (New York  
Foundling Asylum—Founded in 1869)  
Department of Closed Records  
590 Avenue of the Americas  
New York, NY 10011-2019  
718-596-5555

The Orphan Asylum Society of Brooklyn—  
Founded in 1832  
c/o Brookwood Child Care (1960–present)  
25 Washington  
Brooklyn, NY 11201  
(Have records back to 1855)  
Original records were sent to:  
University of Minnesota—Social Welfare  
History Archives  
101 Walter Library  
117 Pleasant Street, S. E.  
Minneapolis, MN 55455  
<http://special.lib.umn.edu/swaha>

The Orphan Asylum Society of New York City  
c/o Graham-Windham Services to Families and  
Children  
One South Broadway  
Hastings-on-Hudson, NY 10706

## On the Web

*Legends & Legacies: Orphanages*  
Browse the growing list of known orphanages  
nationally and internationally, plus learn about  
the history and types of orphanages.  
<http://www.legends.ca/orphanages/orphanages.html>

*Orphan Trains—The American Experience*  
PBS documentary examines the efforts of the  
Children's Aid Society to find rural homes for  
homeless city youths between 1850 and 1929.  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amex/orphan/>

*Orphan Trains of Kansas*  
Search for the lost history and ancestry of  
orphan children sent for the streets of New  
York to the West between 1867 and 1930.  
A great site for Kansas orphan train research.  
<http://www.kancoll.org/articles/orphans/>

*Orphan Train Riders History*  
Howard Hunt recounts his childhood as a  
3-year-old orphan train rider with his 6-year-old  
brother in upstate New York, 1925.  
<http://www.hamilton.net/subscribers/hurd/index.html>

*Orphan Train Heritage Society of America*  
National society that aids researchers of  
orphan train riders, sponsors reunions of riders,  
and publishes a quarterly newsletter.  
<http://www.orphantrainriders.com>

## For Further Reading

*Orphan Trains and Their Precious Cargo:  
The Life's Work of Rev. H. D. Clarke*  
By Clark Kidder  
(Heritage Books, Inc., \$24.95). Order direct  
from the publisher at 800-398-7709, or visit  
their web site at <http://www.heritagebooks.com>.  
Also available on Amazon.com

*Children's Aid Society. Annual Reports 1–10.*  
New York: 1854–1863.  
Reprint. Arno Press and New York Times,  
1971 (now handled by Ayer Company  
Publishers, Salem, New Hampshire).

*The Orphan Trains: Placing Out in America*  
By Marilyn Irvin Holt  
(University of Nebraska Press, 1992)

*Orphan Train Riders—Their Own Stories,*  
Vols. 1–5  
By Mary Ellen Johnson, and Kay B. Hall  
(Baltimore: Gateway Press)  
Available from the Orphan Train Heritage  
Society of America

*The Orphan Trains: The Story of Charles  
Loring Brace and the Children He Saved  
and Failed*  
By Stephen O'Connor  
(Houghton Mifflin Co., \$18.95)

*Orphan Trains to Missouri*  
By Patrick and Trickle  
(University of Missouri Press, \$9.95)



*Floyd Townsend,  
in sparkling new  
clothes, was  
placed in DeWitt,  
Iowa, in 1904.*

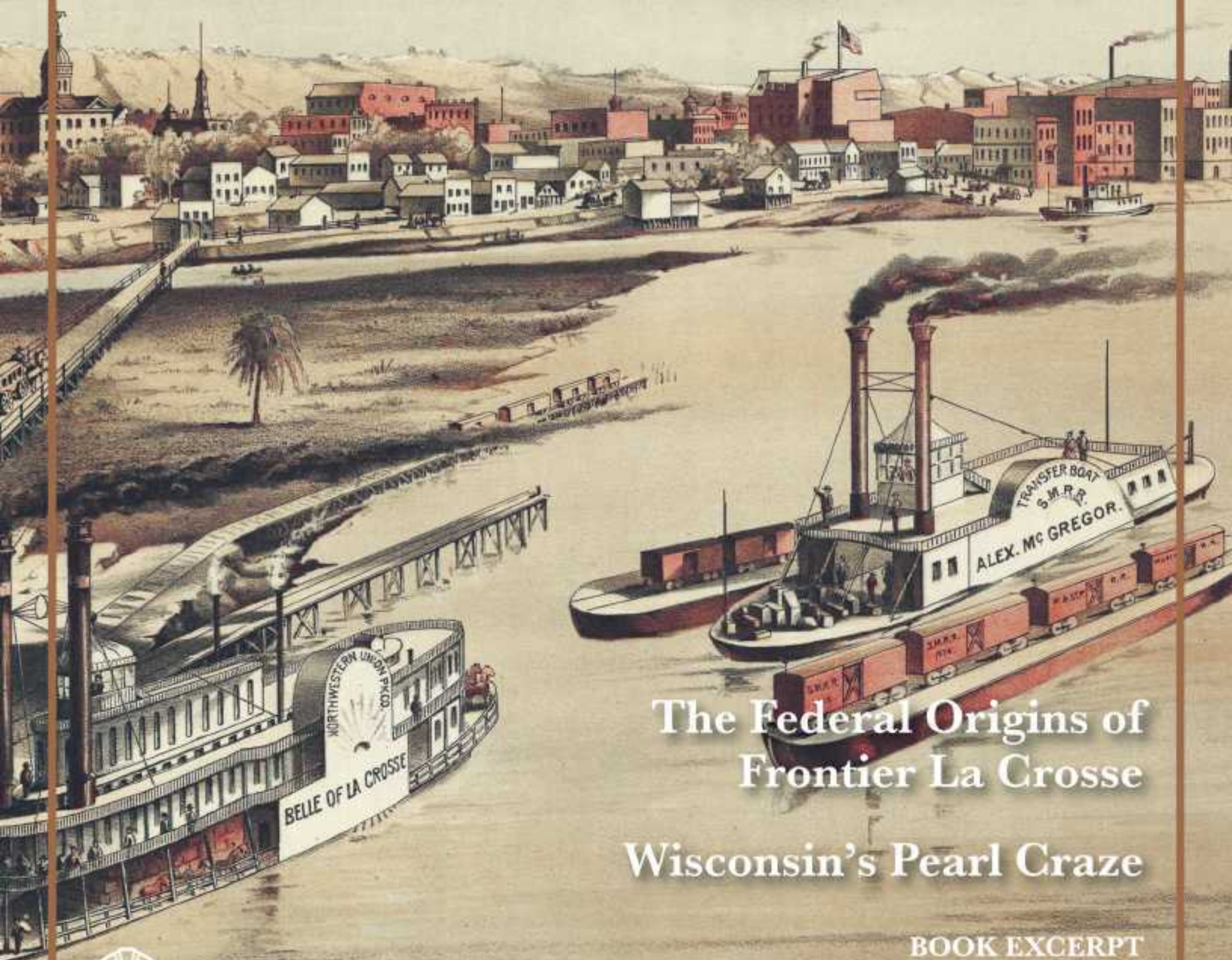
Courtesy of the author



SPRING 2012

# WISCONSIN

magazine *of history*



The Federal Origins of  
Frontier La Crosse

Wisconsin's Pearl Craze

BOOK EXCERPT

*Vintage Wisconsin Gardens*





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THE WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY (ISSN 0043-6534), published quarterly, is a benefit of membership in the Wisconsin Historical Society.

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ISSN 0043-6534 (print)  
ISSN 1943-7366 (online)

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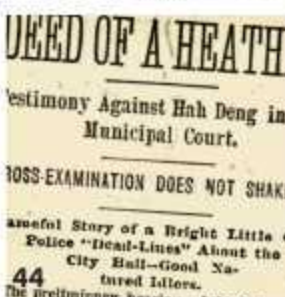
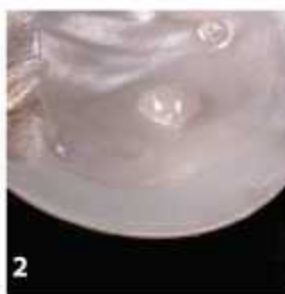
**Mail:** 816 State Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53706

Periodicals postage paid at Madison, WI 53706-1417.

Back issues, if available, are \$8.95 plus postage from the Wisconsin Historical Museum store. Call toll-free: 888-999-1669.

Microfilm copies are available through UMI Periodicals in Microfilm, part of National Archive Publishing, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106, [www.napubco.com](http://www.napubco.com).

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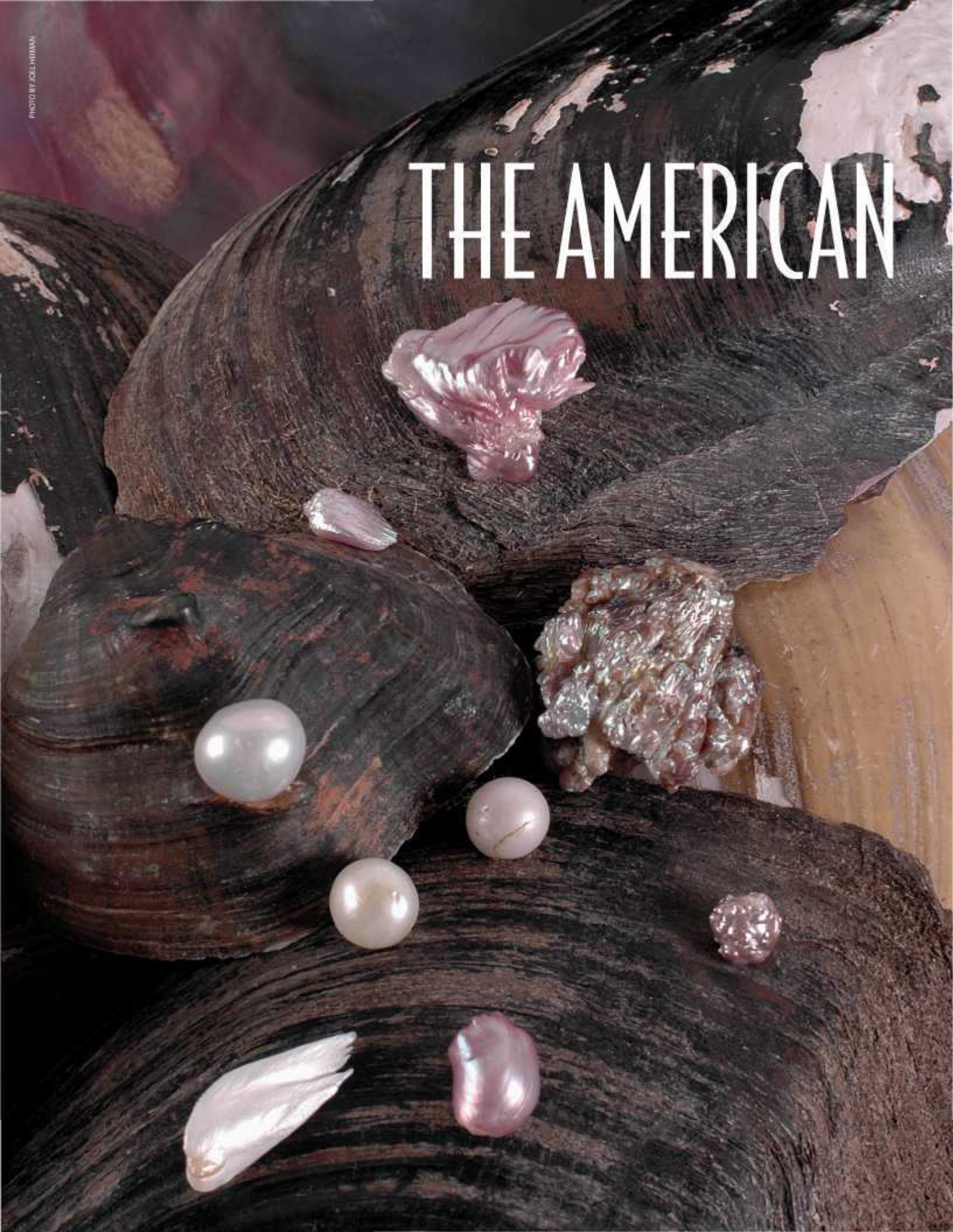
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# THE AMERICAN





# PEARL RUSH

## ITS WISCONSIN BEGINNINGS

BY GEORGE JOHNSON

For an event that lured such numbers of Wisconsin's population into its rivers in search of instant riches, the Pearl Rush has received remarkably little attention. The tumult that would go on to engulf communities across the United States began in the village of Albany, 30 miles south of Madison, in August 1889. The pearl that triggered it all was found in a clam from the Sugar River, which flows through the middle of Albany.

It was the Gilded Age, identified by its often extravagant displays of wealth. Pearls, a long-standing measure of political and financial status, were rising steadily in value at the time and would reach "astronomic [sic] heights between 1893 and 1907."<sup>1</sup> Traditional sources, including the legendary pearl waters of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean, couldn't supply this growing demand. It's no wonder the discovery of salable pearls, free for the taking in local streams, set off what newspapers immediately dubbed a "craze." Rural Wisconsin folk would soon be hitching up their pants and skirts, wading in, and competing in the same world pearl market as naked divers working saltwater reefs halfway around the world.

New York gem expert George F. Kunz took special note of the discoveries in Wisconsin and recorded the spread of pearl rushes that followed. In 1897, he published the first report of these new pearl sources, calling the rush phenomenon "the pearl excitement."<sup>2</sup> In 1908, he provided the most comprehensive summary of the US rush in his *Book of the Pearl*, written with fisheries specialist Charles H. Stevenson.<sup>3</sup>

Wisconsin pearls were unsurpassed in variety. Besides the most salable classic spherical shapes (those shown in the center here), there were (in counter clockwise order) bird wing, pink baroque, pink strawberry, large "gold" baroque, and two more pink baroque shapes, all of which were widely worked into new jewelry styles. A group of typical Wisconsin pearl-bearing mussel shells comprise the photo background. Pearls provided by Eve Alfille, Norman Lange, and Steven Swan.



A clam in the Sugar River at Albany, fall 2011

Albany was not the first pearl rush in the United States. Kunz observed a short-lived 1857 rush in the Notch Brook in northern New Jersey.<sup>4</sup> In 1878, Kunz personally investigated a larger rush in southwest Ohio's Little Miami River.<sup>5</sup> News of these two early rushes and other widely scattered pearl finds was reaching the US jewel trade, which traditionally had dealt in oriental pearls. Business leaders in the gem industry were sensing that they could sell pearls from their own rivers, but it was the Albany rush that revealed people would do the time-consuming work of finding pearls without any guarantee of payment in advance. And buyers quickly discovered they could make a living dealing in the pearls turned up by this unpaid labor force. Overnight a new industry was born out of this homegrown lottery.

Kunz and Stevenson, while accurate in most respects, failed to identify the Sugar River find as the pearl rush equivalent of the gold nugget at Sutter's Mill. They erroneously stated that the first pearl was found in the nearby Pecatonica River.<sup>6</sup> But it is Kunz who gives us the scope and context of the rush as it expanded nationwide. In a few years, the United States was supplying eight percent of the burgeoning pearl trade, ranking third among world sources of gemstone-quality pearls.<sup>7</sup>

### The Albany Beginning

In the summer of 1889, without the benefit of any background knowledge of pearls, E. E. Atherton, editor and proprietor of the weekly *Albany Vindicator*, sensed that something big was happening. At a time when a declaration of war or the death of a president claimed a headline only a column in width, on August 8, 1889, he used his largest type face and stacked his headlines four high to trumpet the near hysteria that had engulfed the town:

“PEARLS”  
EVERYBODY HUNTING THEM!  
One is Found That is Worth \$100  
BETTER THAN A GOLD MINE!

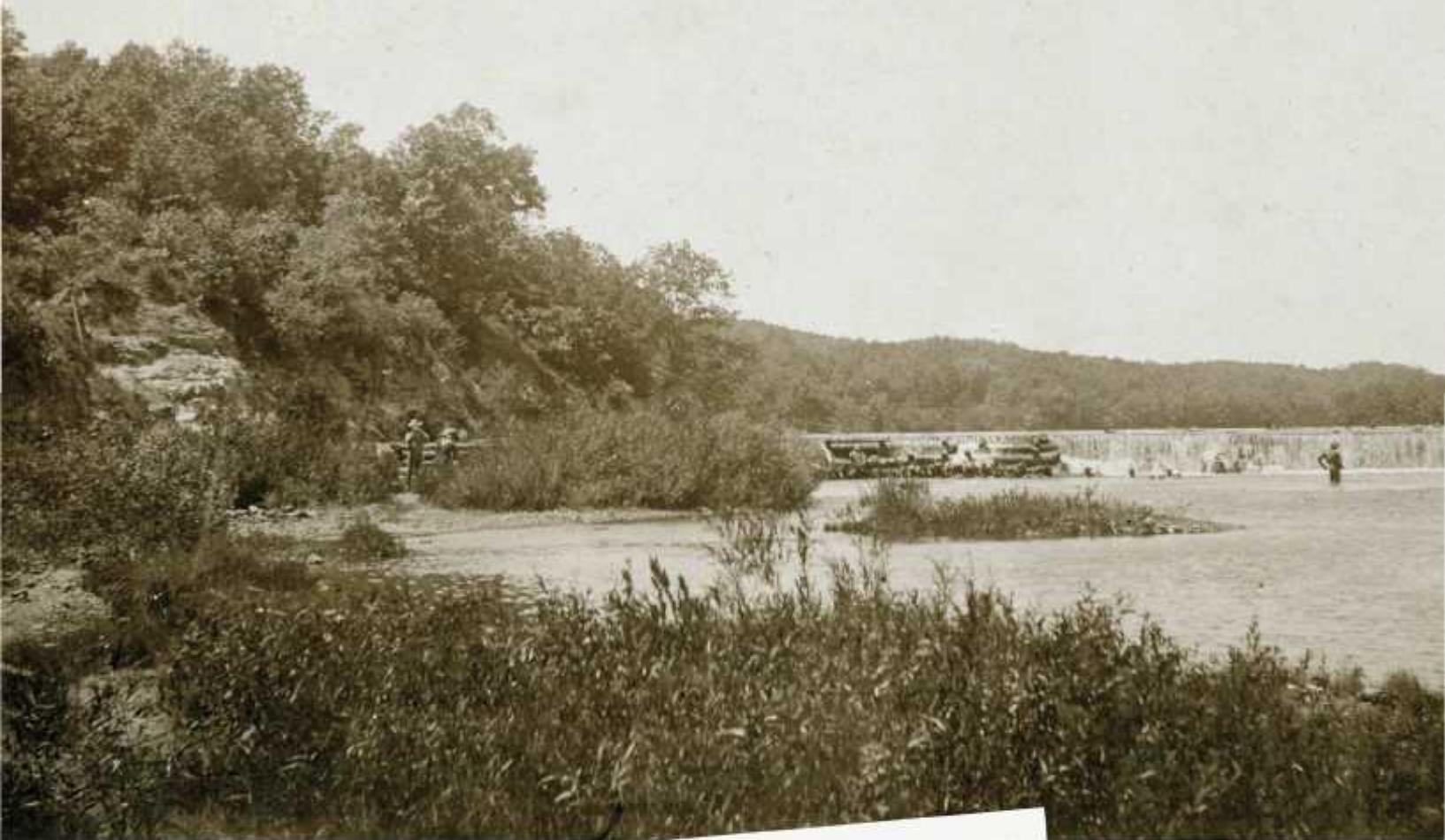
Consider that \$100 in 1889 was equivalent to \$2,400 today—and bigger and pricier pearls would soon follow.<sup>8</sup>

The alert weekly in nearby Monroe, *The Monroe Sentinel*, had actually scooped Albany's editor by one day. On Wednesday, August 7, their headline “Albany Pearl Fisheries” reported a scene “wild with excitement.” And by Friday, the big city dailies were acting on the Monroe and Albany articles.<sup>9</sup> *The Milwaukee Sentinel* introduced the “craze” term with the headline: “MAD OVER PEARLS—Strange Craze at Albany in This State—PEARLS FOUND IN CLAM SHELLS IN SUGAR RIVER—Hundreds of Men, Women and Children Engaged in a Mad Scramble for the Shells—Digging in the Bed of the Creek.”<sup>10</sup>

On Monday, August 12, Milwaukee's *Sentinel* continued its Albany reporting with the observation that “this little town of 800 inhabitants has gone completely crazy.”<sup>11</sup> That same day, a reporter for Madison's *Wisconsin State Journal* had completed a two-day railroad tour of the Sugar River and filed a lengthy piece detailing the singular nature of the Albany happenings. He told of the spread of Sugar River “Pearl Fishing” downstream to Brodhead and north into Madison where “fully two dozen people were in Lake Monona Bay . . . and quite a number of pearls were found.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, pearl rushes at Darlington in the Pecatonica River and at Fort Atkinson in the Rock River were reported that week in the *Sentinel*.<sup>13</sup> These rivers were larger, with watersheds that included many more communities. Pearls were also reported in the Mississippi in the *Prairie Du Chien Union* on August 14 and 15 with a mixture of fact and a hint of disdain for the enthusiasm shown by these unconventional fortune seekers: “It is fun for the boys but hard on the clams.” With fall temperatures still warm enough for people to take to the waters, we find newspapers telling of mass excitement in numerous Wisconsin communities in late 1889.<sup>14</sup>

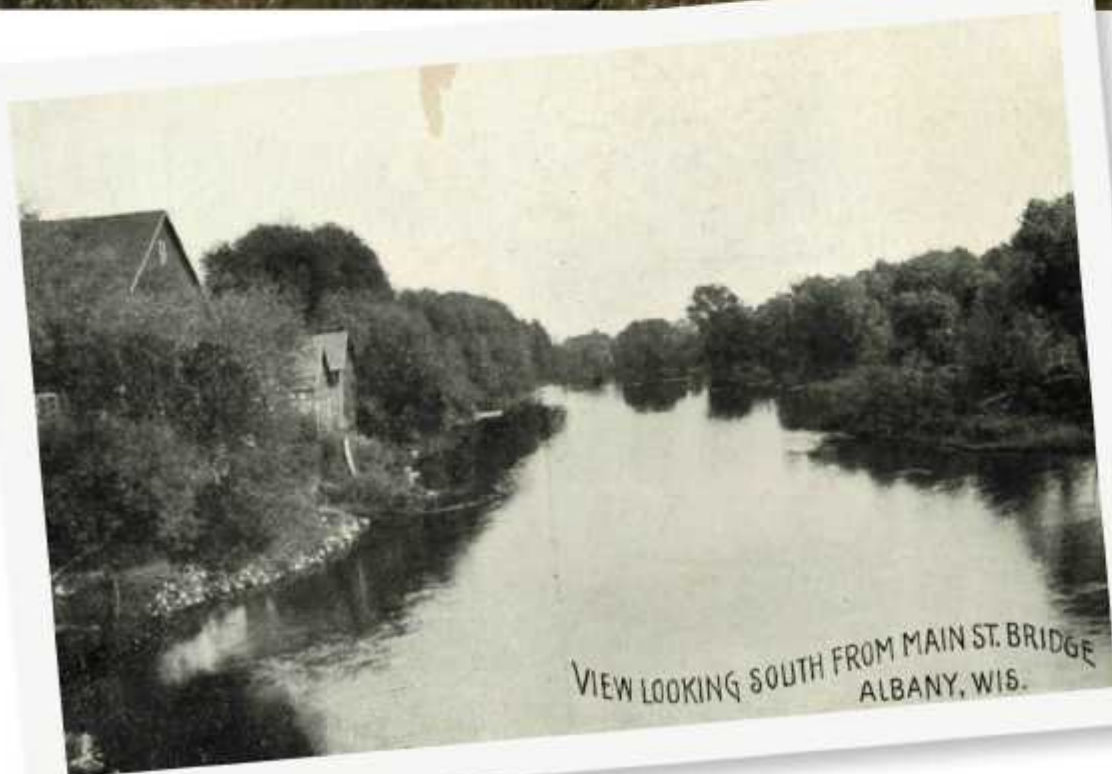
The spring warm-up in 1890 reenergized the Wisconsin rush and added more towns: Chilton, Columbus, and Mukwonago. In all, at least 23 communities experienced rushes





Pearlers liked the shallows of the Sugar River as in this stretch below a dam near Broadhead, undated

In early August 1889, Albany residents flocked by the hundreds to this part of the Sugar River, setting off the American Pearl Rush.



VIEW LOOKING SOUTH FROM MAIN ST. BRIDGE  
ALBANY, WIS.



Ad for jewelers Bunde & Upmeyer from the Milwaukee Elite Directory (1891/2) In it, Wisconsin pearls were marketed as equal to oriental pearls which were much better known.

within the first two years of the Albany rush, and there are probably many yet to be discovered.<sup>15</sup> Kunz and Stevenson place rushes in 1890 mostly in Wisconsin and its surrounding states. Rivers in the mid-south, especially Tennessee, quickly became centers of pearl activity. By 1895, folks in rural Arkansas were pearling in such numbers that "the local papers reported much apprehension and difficulty in harvesting the cotton."<sup>16</sup> Continuing ever outward, pearling fevers erupted in a few places in Georgia and Florida in 1897 and were stirring the populace in Maine in 1901.<sup>17</sup>

Exactly what brought about the rush in Albany, this most unlikely of communities and smallest of rivers? Newspapers cite several scenarios, all with a common thread. An unidentified person with some knowledge of pearls found one in the Sugar River and sold it for enough money that, when the word got out, others were motivated to check the story for themselves. Within a day or two, a few more quality pearls were found, a confident buyer was at hand, and the rest is history.

Every day or two, a pearl of salable quality moved the rush along. One ten-dollar pearl was equivalent to a week's wages at that time.<sup>18</sup> Every pearler knew the next clam could be hiding the next big pearl, worth ten times ten dollars—or maybe even a hundred times that sum. The almost instant formation of a competitive market for pearls appears to have been a crucial element of the Albany rush.

Pearl buyers were being named in the first newspaper articles. Perhaps these would-be dealers were some of the first to go into the river to determine if pearls were really there. Once this was confirmed, they were poised to stake their claim in this new business. They would leave the uncomfortable and less-rewarding search of the river beds to others.

In the first week of the rush, as chronicled in the *Milwaukee Sentinel's* "Mad Over Pearls" article, much had already happened financially: "[Pearls] have been sold in New York for \$75 and even \$100 each and a jeweler here [Albany] has paid out nearly \$3,000 [\$72,000 in today's money] for a large number . . ."<sup>19</sup>





Milwaukee jewelers Louis C. Bunde and W. H. Upmeyer examining pearls

On September 9, 1889, the *Beloit Free Press* provided this thumbnail of the Albany pearl market: "A New York buyer offered \$3,500 [\$85,000] for it [a single pearl], but his figure was considered too low. Hundreds of small pearls are found and sold daily. The purchasers are agents of Chicago, New York and Paris houses." Everything points to pearls moving out quickly and money flowing back to keep the pearls coming. By July 18, 1890, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* reported under an Albany dateline, "[T]he most reliable estimate places the money received for pearls in this vicinity during the last year at \$300,000," a startling seven million dollars today.

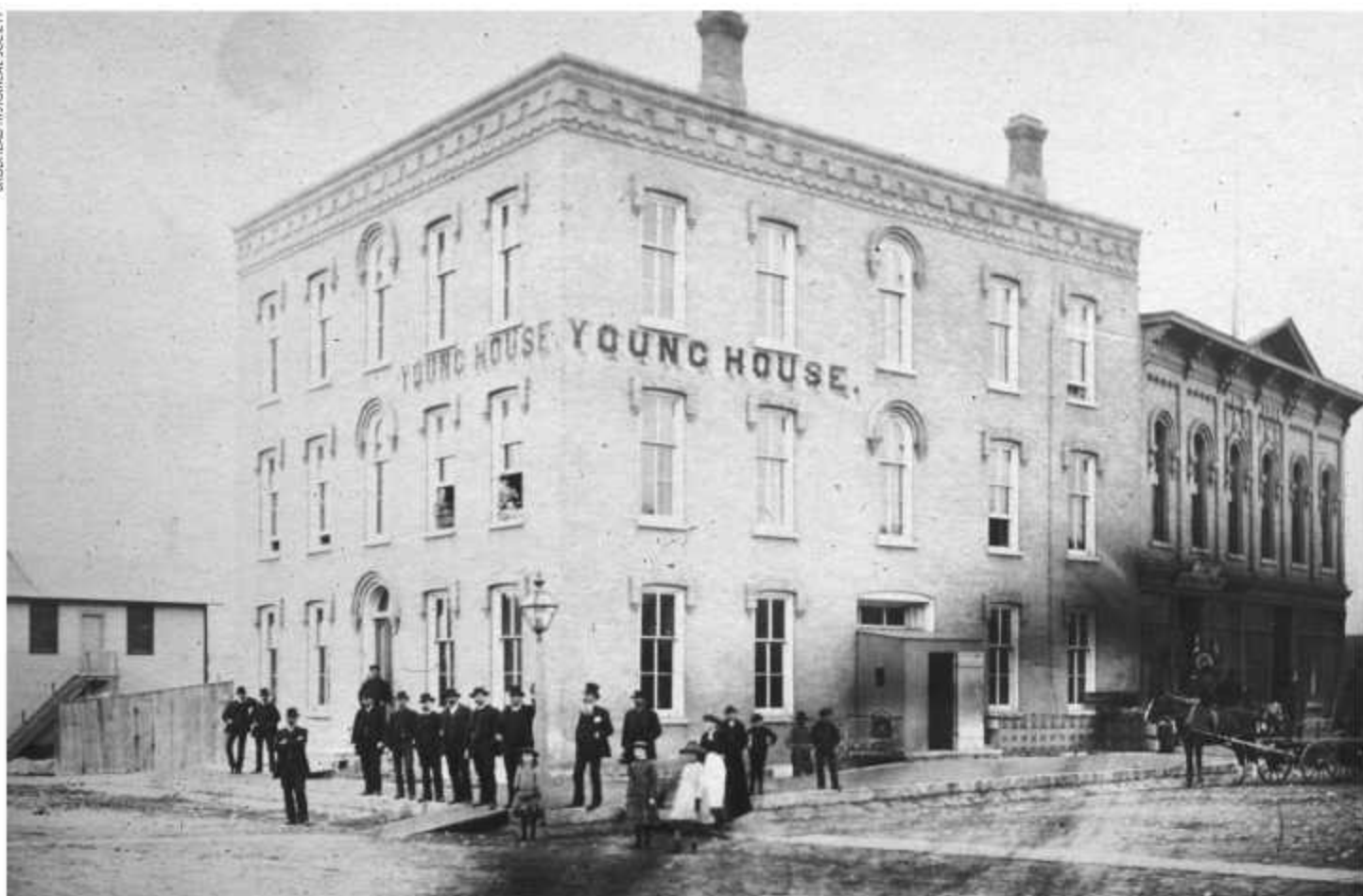
The Milwaukee jewelers Bunde and Upmeyer<sup>20</sup> and the Brodhead fur and ginseng root buyer John E. Young became major pearl buyers as the rush progressed. The three-story Young House, with name intact, stands today at the southeast corner of Brodhead's town square. Three blocks down the street is his well-preserved Victorian home, built in 1895, which local lore notes was a product of his successful pearl business.<sup>21</sup>

**THE PEARL HUNTERS.**  
They Are Lining Their Pockets in Illinois and Wisconsin.

**GALENA, Ill., Aug. 20.**—The craze for pearl hunting has reached this section and bids fair to be as general as it has been in Southern Wisconsin during the past ten days or more. At the present time investigations are confined to the smaller tributaries of the Galena river, which abound in the shells in which gems are found, and many farmers and their families, excited by the stories of suddenly acquired wealth, have left their fields and are industriously searching for pearls, not a few being rewarded by really valuable discoveries. Galena river, which is very low, is said to be a prolific field for pearl hunters, and a large party are already invading that stream a few miles above the city. News reached here to the effect that at Darlington and vicinity the total value of pearls found will aggregate \$10,000.

**PRAIRIE DU CHIEN, Wis., Aug. 20.**—The pearl hunting craze has struck here, and the largest number of pearls yet reported in the State have been gathered during the last day or two. More than 100 were sent from here.





The Young house, Brodhead, undated

E. E. Kittleson of rural Albany was both a pearler and buyer. Much fun was made of his leaving the hard farm work to his sons while he dabbled in pearls.<sup>22</sup> In all, we can identify close to a dozen individuals who traded in pearls from the Sugar River during the first years of the rush.

Wisconsin pearlers became tough bargainers. It wouldn't have taken them long to figure out the pearl size/quality/price relationship and the first offer was often refused. For the much larger numbers of small, lower-value pearls, the contest often came down to the seller holding out for a quarter or a half dollar more than the dealer's "final" offer. The dealer had to curb his urge to pay less than a fair price for more desirable pearls. As in any small town business exchange, it was in his interest to broadcast that he had paid what sounded like fair prices, leaving happy sellers to confirm to others that they could expect the same generous treatment.

But was he really being that generous? While the prices the public was seeing in the papers and hearing from each other

**GOT \$4,451 FOR SUGAR RIVER PEARLS**  
**J. A. Young, the Brodhead Hotel Man, Makes a Good Sale.**  
 John A. Young, the well known Brodhead hotel man, sold to Bunde & Umpmeyer, of Milwaukee, a lot of Sugar river pearls, for which he received \$4,451. Negotiations had been in progress for some time, and still Mr. Young has "a few more left."

Buyer John Young is reported to have sold some of his pearl stock to Bunde and Umpmeyer who would then broker most of them in New York or Europe.





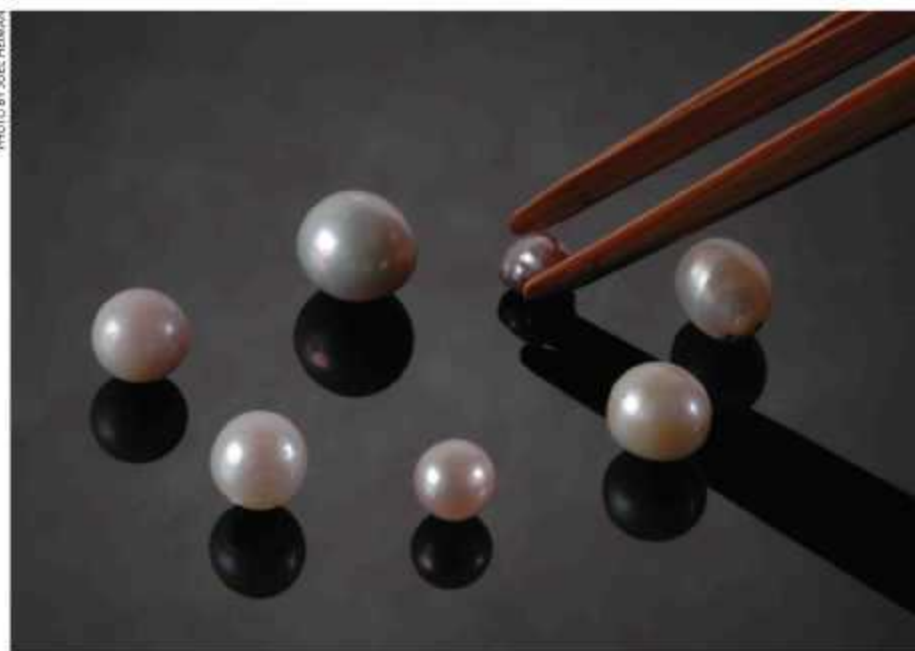
A group of pearl buyers including prominent Wisconsin buyer, Ed Kittelson (seated, far left).

may have spurred the search for pearls, that's not to say the lucky finders were receiving anything close to the true market value, especially when it came to the very best pearls. There are too many stories like Prairie Du Chien dealer John Peacock's purchase of what he labeled the Ismal pearl. Peacock relates that he paid Dick Ismal \$1,000 for it and quickly sold it to a Chicago dealer for \$5,000. He later learned it had sold in New York for \$10,000 and was then passed to London for \$20,000.<sup>23</sup> The final retail price could have been double that (\$1,000,000 today)—a four-thousand-percent markup on a pearl that Dick Ismal very likely considered his most fortunate of finds.

### Into the River for Pearls

A pearl is formed "when an object ends up inside the body of the mollusk and becomes coated with shell material."<sup>24</sup> The largest, best formed pearls are found near the center of the clam. To get to these precious gems, all a Wisconsin pearler needed was a stiff bladed knife. They felt along the bottom of the

PHOTO BY JOE HEIMAN



Flawless pearls, such as these from Wisconsin and nearby states, were quickly found to be indistinguishable from the better known oriental pearls.



Here four pearls can be seen embedded in blisters within the shell lining of this clam from the Mississippi River near Prairie du Chien.

stream with their hands until they encountered the upper end of a clam protruding from the mud or sand. It pulled out easily and could be dropped in a bag. When they had gathered enough, they went to the shore and cut the adductor muscles, probing the fleshy interior with their fingers for a pearl.

In deeper waters, pearlers learned to feel along the bottom with their feet. A clam could be teased out with one's toes and nudged upward along the inside of the opposite leg until the pearler could grasp it without bending over. Sometimes a glass-bottomed bucket was used to visually check the river bed. Various rakes and grasping devices were developed to permit working from a boat or through the ice.

It was a game of numbers—and luck. If a pearler gathered

enough clams, he would eventually find the perfect round or drop-shaped globe of nacre—silky smooth surface, glowing rich in luster, but usually too small to bring much money. But every couple of grains larger doubled the value. Perhaps the most fortunate of the pearlers was W. H. Murray of Brodhead. In just one year of pearling in the Sugar River, it is reported that he earned enough money to purchase a farm.<sup>25</sup>

### The Lure of the Rush

The first few days of the Albany rush, with its mass migration to the shallow waters, were the high visibility part of the rush that made it especially newsworthy. The crowds gathered in easily accessible segments of the Sugar River in the town of



Albany and at a couple of road bridges out in the countryside. In a few weeks, the nearby and most easily wadable sections were emptied of clams, and a more resourceful breed of pearler took over. They could walk up and down the stream in the shallows. They could hike across someone's land from a country road or they could get a boat. Some families even set up camp on the riverbank. The river itself was public property as it is today, and by now everyone knew the pearls were out there. The high numbers of pearls identified as from the Sugar River three years into the rush tell us that many fortune seekers were still in the river, spreading up and downstream from the towns.

In the circumscribed culture of 1889 small towns, before the telephone or automobiles, the lure of the river and pearls was irresistible. It meant an exciting break from everyday routine. The whole family would join in, especially because many lived close enough that they could walk to the river. Albany editor Atherton captured the carnival atmosphere: "Monday morning old and young, rich and poor, men, women and children were out at least four hundred strong . . ." <sup>26</sup>

Those of recent European origin may have remembered stories of a time when dukes and kings claimed all pearls found in the realm, and the penalty for withholding them was having a hand cut off. <sup>27</sup> Women may have heard their grandmothers tell of ancient sumptuary laws that prohibited commoners from wearing pearls. No less an authority than the 1495 Diet of Worms decreed that, "citizens who were not of noble birth . . . must withhold from the use of gold and pearls." <sup>28</sup> For three hundred years, restrictions such as these were the law of the land in Europe. Some surely thought of their immigrant forebears' vision of a country of streets paved with gold, only now it was pearls. Above all, there was the intoxicating possibility of riches beyond imagining.

A month into the rush, the *Vindicator* reported, "Visitors and clam hunters are pouring into the village, and the banks of the river for miles are dotted with tents." <sup>29</sup> Pulses of new activity heightened the pressure to join in. Word might circulate that a trainload of people was coming over to pearl from another town, or tales would spread of someone finding an especially rich bed of clams. And nothing could match the impact of the discovery of an unusually good pearl. Clams were present in every sizable stream and lake. Any of fifty clam species could contain a pearl. They formed huge beds in parts of rivers and may have constituted the largest body of biomass of any class of animal organisms. But, for all their numbers, only a small fraction contained pearls. One marketable pearl per ten thousand clams was the likelihood of success quoted by a prominent pearl buyer of the time. <sup>30</sup>

### A Darker Side Appears

The excesses of the rush inevitably became apparent, and a harshly negative tone began entering the otherwise buoyant reporting. Most visible were the disposal practices of the



Art Nouveau-style brooch of gold and US natural pearls, ca. 1915, owned by Eve Alfille

LANG ANTIQUE & ESTATE JEWELRY  
PHOTO BY JOEL HEIMAN



The Wisconsin Pearl Rush brought to market quantities of lower value pearls that included unusual shapes and colors. Craftsmen worked them into jewelry in a price range available to middle class women. This "Bunch of Grapes" brooch in Art Nouveau style was created using purple US seed pearls. The brooch was manufactured in Rhode Island, ca. 1900.

Owner: Eve Alfille

PHOTO BY JOEL HEIMAN



pearlers. They simply left the shells along the banks. And it wasn't just the shells. By September 19, 1889, the *Albany Vindicator* was claiming that "[I]t is a wonder that all who venture on or near the river are not taken sick considering the stench constantly arising from decaying clams along the banks." The meat, considered inedible, was usually discarded into the river, though some was used as fish bait or fed to pigs.

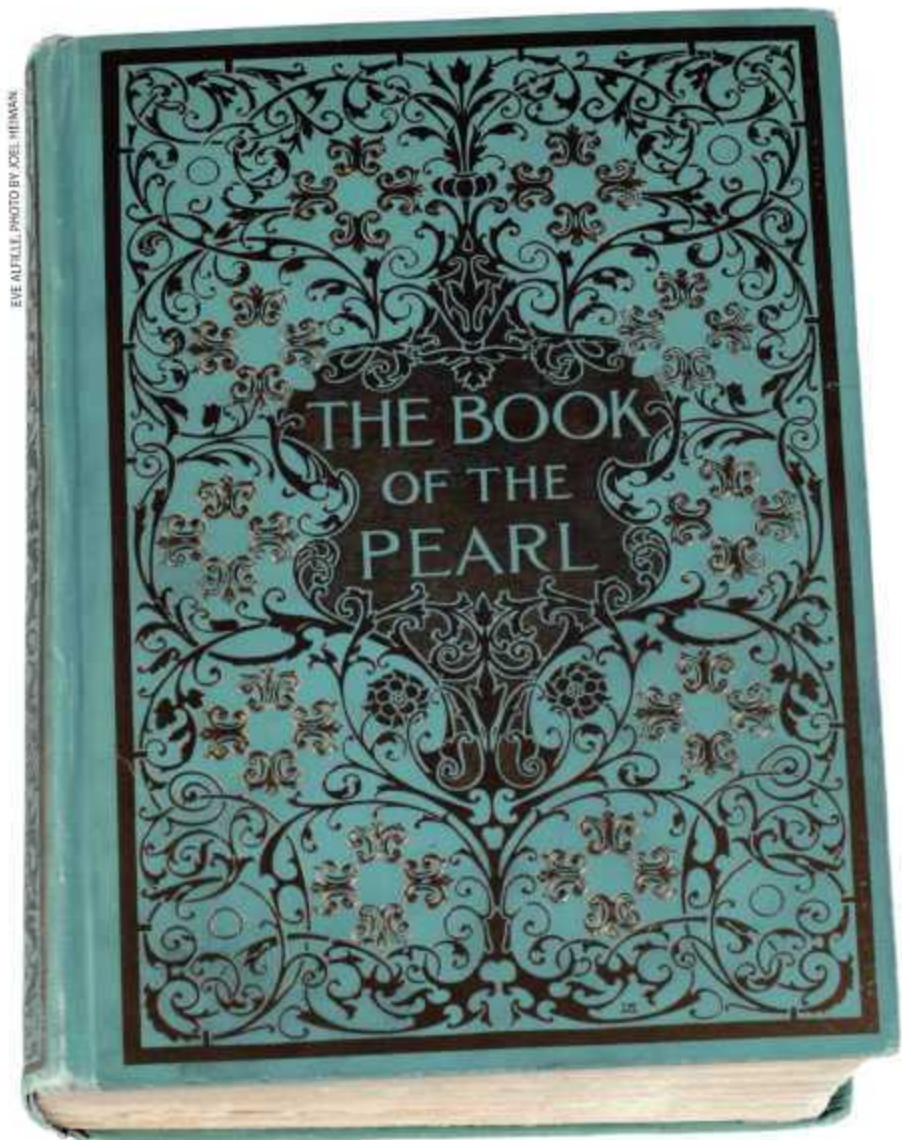
Pearling had other detractors. The bedraggled river denizens were easy targets of ridicule, especially prim ladies fumbling in the mud and water all day. The Yankee tendency to scorn the idea of wealth without work was widely invoked. As attendance fell off at Sunday services, churchmen railed and, most unsettling of all, the value of the pearls was questioned. *The Beloit Free Press* reported, "The '\$500 worth' of pearls shipped from Darlington to Chicago last week have been pronounced worthless by Chicago experts."<sup>31</sup> The *Milwaukee Sentinel* trumpeted, "OF LITTLE VALUE, JEWELERS WOULDN'T GIVE 10 CENTS A BUSHEL FOR THEM," based on statements by Milwaukee jewelers.<sup>32</sup>

Landowners didn't always cooperate. At Brodhead, nine farmers joined in running an advertisement stating their land was off limits to pearlers.<sup>33</sup> At nearby Argyle, an investor group set out to lease five miles of river, hoping to claim all the pearls for themselves. This came to naught when they found they couldn't restrict public access at the bridges.<sup>34</sup>

Kunz spoke out early against this wholesale slaughter of clams and, in his Fish Commission report, opened his detailed discussion about their conservation with this statement, "The state of affairs is one that calls loudly for reform. The wealth of Unios [clams] that filled our rivers is rapidly being destroyed by ignorant and wasteful methods of pearl-hunting; and . . . some form of protection is important . . ."<sup>35</sup> Within a year following the beginning of the Albany rush, even the newspapers were reporting calls for government action: "PROTECT THE PEARL BEDS. It is an outrage . . . that the government has as yet taken no steps to protect these pearl beds . . . from utter ruin."<sup>36</sup>

### From Wisconsin Rivers to Spectacular Jewelry

Despite these problems, it is apparent that great numbers of people were actively pearling in Wisconsin. And they were coming up with pearls equal in beauty to any in the world. Following the path of gemstones today, the highest quality material flowed to a relatively small group of dealers and jewelry



In 1897, New York gem expert George F. Kunz took special note of the discoveries in Wisconsin and recorded the spread of rushes that followed. In 1908, he provided the most comprehensive summary of the US rush in his *Book of the Pearl*, written with fisheries specialist Charles H. Stevenson.

houses in the largest cities. This commerce was finely tuned to guide each pearl to the exact place where it could earn top dollar at retail. A large pearl of the highest quality might pass through a half-dozen hands before finding its ultimate point of display in a splendid pendant or set of earrings. It was often a question of finding a pearl that exactly matched another in size, shape, surface, color, and luster. Craftsmen sometimes distributed a lead casting of the exact pear-shaped pearl they needed to complete a pair of drop earrings for a duchess. And a graduated pearl necklace could tie up a fortune while the jeweler



waited for one or two pearls of just the right size and shading to fill the missing spaces that would complete the piece.

This is almost certainly the story behind the assembly of the famous Lady Dudley necklace. Kunz recounts, "The pearls of Lady Dudley were sold at Christie's [auction house in London] on July 4, 1902. Among them was a magnificent necklace of forty-seven slightly graduated round pearls, of large size and unusually brilliant orient; [some quite possibly from Wisconsin] their gross weight was 1090 grains . . ." <sup>37</sup> This was an average size slightly smaller than a pea. The auction price was £22,000, which today would be \$2,558,581 or over \$54,000 per pearl.

The major auction houses, by conducting public bidding, played a significant, if not central, role in the valuation of fine pearls worldwide. They were an integral part of the gem business culture in the large cities and ultimately set the price of a pearl on the banks of the Sugar River. In the weak rural economy of the early 1890s, the value of pearls had finally reached a level high enough to sustain the enthusiasm of rushes across the United States. The ever-rising price of pearl jewelry in Europe, Asia, and New York continued to give impetus to the US pearl rush until about 1910. By then, many of the easily accessible waters in the United States were stripped of their clams.

A few years into the rush, a new use was found for clamshells. The American pearl-button industry had its beginnings in 1891 and is much better documented than the pearl rush. The button factories purchased clamshells by the ton, and pearls were recovered when the button clammers cleaned their shells at the end of the day. People could make a living gathering shells even if they never found a pearl.

Furthermore, the waters shell clammers worked were different. Pearlers liked the wadable upper ends of Wisconsin streams. Just the opposite, shell clammers needed big bodies of water where vast beds of clams allowed them to work out of their home docks in boats outfitted with bars of crowfoot hooks used to drag the riverbed. In larger rivers many pearlmen no doubt switched to the more dependable business of clamming once a market developed for shells after 1891. Button-shell clamming went on for over fifty years, and eventually these professionals moved up the rivers until they reached the shallows where their quarry had often been depopulated by pearl rushes years earlier.

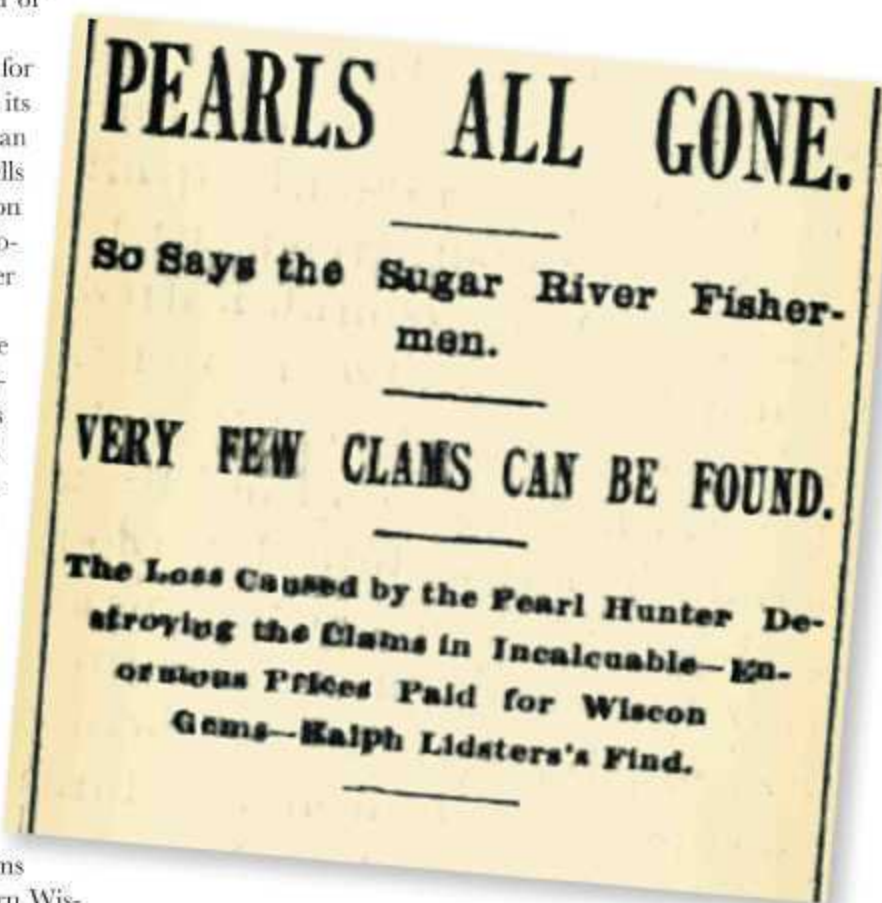
Using pearls-to-clams ratios worked out by Kunz and Stevenson, we can be reasonably certain that clams of the Sugar River, and streams in general in southern Wisconsin, produced more pearls than the clams of most other US rivers. <sup>38</sup> Not only are there references to other large Wisconsin sales, but the 1893 organizers of the Wisconsin exhibition

at Chicago's World Columbian Exposition put together an eye-popping show of pearls described as follows: "[O]f particular interest to visitors was a \$150,000 (\$3,703,607) collection of pearls from the Pecatonica and Sugar Rivers. The pearls were of many colors including lavender, pink, blue, white and lilac. Tiffany and Co., the New York jewelry firm, purchased most of the pearls for sale in Europe." <sup>39</sup>

The thousand or so pearls in the exhibit had to have come mostly from these two rivers and mostly in the fourth year of the Albany rush, a time when the newspapers were only reporting the finding of an especially valuable pearl. In other words, a lot of people were still pearly hard in southern Wisconsin well into the 1890s.

### Adding Up the Contribution

Reliable information on the economic impact of the pearl rush isn't available, but Kunz and Stevenson report some round numbers for southern Wisconsin: "[A]bout \$300,000 worth of pearls were collected before the end of 1891, greatly exceeding all records for fresh waters." <sup>40</sup> They typically quote



Headlines from the *Janesville Gazette* in 1891 were frequently found in Wisconsin newspapers in the 1880s and 1890s.



prices at the buyer level, making this equal to \$7,000,000 profit for the pearlers in current dollars. At another point they report one county in the area that received \$100,000 in 1891 (\$2,400,000).<sup>41</sup> In her report, "Washboards, Pigtoes, and Muckets: Historic Musseling in the Mississippi Watershed," Cheryl Claasen concluded, "Proceeds from pearls brought to many individuals instant fortune and have a heretofore unacknowledged role in the capitalization of rural America in the period prior to 1930. Pearl revenue exceeded that of all other natural product industries combined, excepting timber, in many areas."<sup>42</sup> This maintained a sense of unending bonanza when, in truth, for most it was a construction of false hopes.

Many pearls continued to be found in Wisconsin as a byproduct of the button industry. At one time the state allowed individuals to collect up to 50 clams a day and pearling persisted as a Sunday afternoon recreation for some families.<sup>43</sup> Today all collecting of clams for any purpose is against the law in Wisconsin and surrounding waters with one exception. Carefully regulated professional divers are allowed to collect a limited tonnage of certain clam species from some of the navigational pools of the Mississippi River. These shells are processed into nuclei used by the far Pacific cultured pearl industry. A few pearls, some of remarkably high quality, are still held in family collections and come on the market from time to time. At least two pearl dealers keep small stocks of these early Wisconsin natural pearls and supply the handful of artisans who work with this once-renowned homegrown gemstone.

Kunz summed up the era, explaining, "[I]n the last quarter of the nineteenth century, in Europe, as well as in America and elsewhere where gems are worn, luxury found in pearls a refinement, associated with richness and beauty, exceeding that of diamonds and other crystal gems, and in the last few years they have taken the highest rank among jewels."<sup>44</sup> Thus the product of one of our most colorful eras became the centerpiece of some of the most valuable pieces of human adornment ever created.

We now know that the silts and sands of Wisconsin's water-



A portrait of Tsarina Maria Alexandrovna by Franz Xaver Winterhalter, 1857. Such elaborate adornment with pearls by European and Asian aristocracy created the demand that brought about the pearl rush in America.

ways once produced jewels as treasured as the fabled Burmese rubies and Kashmiri sapphires. It is not a stretch to imagine a time when the unkempt figure scrambling up the bank of a nameless Wisconsin creek just might have been clutching the perfect teardrop pearl that would enable a Parisian jeweler to complete the wedding tiara of a Hapsburg princess. ❧





The Johnson pearl was found on a sandbar just west of the Green County Highway T bridge where it crosses the Sugar River. In 1965, Illinois youth Bruce Johnson discovered the pearl attached inside the still-hinged shells of a giant floater clam (*Pyganodon grandis*). Weighing in at one-half carat, it is an unusual light-gray color with pink overtones. This same type of unusual coloring resulted in widespread attention for Wisconsin pearls in world jewel markets. Pin created by S. Horowitz Co. Jewelers of Chicago. Owned by Marilyn Johnson, Madison.

## Notes

1. Elisabeth Strack, *Pearls* (Stuttgart, Germany: Rühle-Dieckmann-Verlag, 2006), 36.
2. George F. Kunz, "A Brief History of the Gathering of Fresh-Water Pearls in the United States," *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission*, 1897 (Washington DC: The Commission, Govt. Print. Office, 1897), 322.
3. George Frederick Kunz and Charles Hugh Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl: Its History, Art, Science and Industry* (New York: The Century Co., 1908; Reprint, Mineola, NY: Dover, 2001).
4. *Ibid.*, 259, 261.
5. *Ibid.*, 261.
6. *Ibid.*, 262.
7. *Ibid.*, 80.
8. The price conversions given in this article are usually earlier dollars compared to current dollars, or earlier English pounds compared to current US dollars. They are calculated from tables provided online by the website "Measuring Worth," a service created by Lawrence H. Oliver and Samuel H. Williamson. Their specific value quotes are calculated from Consumer Price Index (CPI) comparisons where, for example, \$1 in 1889 is worth \$24.14 in 2009. See [www.measuringworth.com/worthmeasures.html](http://www.measuringworth.com/worthmeasures.html).
9. "Pearl Fishing in Wisconsin," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 9, 1889.
10. "Mad Over Pearls," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 11, 1889, 1-3.
11. "Crazy for Pearls," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 12, 1889.
12. "Pearl Fishing," *Wisconsin State Journal*, August 12, 1889.
13. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 15 and 17, 1889.
14. Other pearl rushes reported in 1889 include: Watertown, *The Watertown Gazette*, August 16; Waukesha, *Waukesha Free Press*, August 22; Neenah, *The Times*, September 17; Evansville, *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 14; Potosi, *Galena Gazette*, August 22; Shullsburg, *Galena Gazette*, August 22; Blanchardville, *Galena Gazette*, October 1; New Diggings, *Galena Gazette*, December 19; Argyle, *Galena Gazette*, October 4.
15. Most 1889 rushes continued unabated into 1890. The following seven rushes were reported for the first time in 1890, bringing the Wisconsin total to 22 found so far: Chilton, Columbus, Mukwanago, Mauston, Shiocton, Watertown, and Waterloo.
16. Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 264.
17. *Ibid.*, 265.
18. Robert C. Nesbit, *The History of Wisconsin*, Vol. 3 (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1985), 541. Note that the average wage in Milwaukee in 1892 was \$2.25 per day. Rural areas would have been somewhat less.
19. "Mad Over Pearls," 3.
20. Bunde and Upmeyer Co., *Story of the Connection of Bunde and Upmeyer With the American Pearl Industry*, Milwaukee Public Library Collection, 1.
21. *Commemorative Biographical Record of the Counties of Rock, Green, Grant, Iowa, and Lafayette, Wisconsin* (Union Pub. Co., 1901), 496-498.
22. Sugar River Pearls. From the files of the Albany Historical Society, Albany, Wisconsin. "Big Pearl Hunt," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 28, 1890.
23. Oral history interview with John Peacock [sound recording], 1958, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, Wisconsin.
24. Neil H. Landman, Paula M. Mikkelsen, Rüdiger Bieker, and Bennet Bronson, *Pearls, A Natural History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 26.
25. "Big Pearl Hunt," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, July 28, 1890.
26. "Pearl!" *Albany Vindicator*, August 8, 1889.
27. Landman, et. al., 191.
28. Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 25.
29. *Brodhead Independent*, August 16, 1889.
30. *Pearls, Shells and Nuggets* (circular), Marshalltown, Iowa, H. Willard, Son and Co. The Willard Co. was a major buyer of pearls during the rush period. The following is from their literature of the early 1900s: "Some authorities put it one pearl to every one hundred mussels

opened, and of these pearls found, only one percent of this number are of good quality, and bring any satisfactory price whatever."

31. *Beloit Free Press*, August 22, 1889.
32. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 19, 1889.
33. *Brodhead Independent*, August 15, 1890.
34. *Galena Gazette*, October 4, 1889.
35. Kunz, *Bulletin of the United States Fish Commission*, 1897, 325.
36. "Mines of Wealth," *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 4, 1890.
37. Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 479.
38. *Ibid.*, 272. Kunz and Stevenson calculated that Wisconsin's Mississippi River bottom clambers recovered pearls worth \$21 per ton of clams harvested. Nearly half their income would have been from pearls. Illinois rivers yielded only \$5 in pearls per ton harvested.
39. *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 7, 1893. Final report of the World's Columbian Exhibition, Wisconsin Exhibition report.
40. Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 262.
41. *Ibid.*
42. Cheryl Claassen, "Washboards, Pigtoes and Muckets: Historic Musseling in the Mississippi Watershed," *Historical Archaeology* 28 (1994): 1.
43. Nora Nelson Berk Memoir, Jensen/Johnson Family Papers, Personal Collection.
44. Kunz and Stevenson, *The Book of the Pearl*, 30.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



George Johnson grew up near the Sugar River, southeast of Brodhead, Wisconsin. As a boy fishing for catfish in the Sugar, he found a few misshapen pearls in the clams he used for bait. He also heard a vague tale of Sugar River pearls once selling for a fortune in the London jewelry market. Sixty-five years later, he chanced upon a reprint of the 1908 *Book of the Pearl*. There it was—a paragraph recounting the 1890 London sale of a cache of Sugar River pearls for £11,700. That was the day he began researching this story.

(ISSN 0043-6534)

# WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

*The State Historical Society of Wisconsin • Vol. 68, No. 2 • Winter, 1984-1985*





# WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

Published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 816 State Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53706. Distributed to members as part of their dues. (Annual membership, \$15, or \$12.50 for those over 65 or members of affiliated societies; family membership, \$20, or \$15 for those over 65 or members of affiliated societies; contributing, \$50; supporting, \$100; sustaining, \$200-\$500; patron, \$500 or more.) Single numbers from Volume 57 forward are \$2. Microfilmed copies available through University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106; reprints of Volumes 1 through 20 and most issues of Volumes 21 through 56 are available from Kraus Reprint Company, Route 100, Millwood, New York 10546. Communications should be addressed to the editor. The Society does not assume responsibility for statements made by contributors. Second-class postage paid at Madison, Wisconsin, and at additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Wisconsin Magazine of History, Madison, Wisconsin 53706. Copyright © 1985 by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

*The Wisconsin Magazine of History* is indexed annually by the editors; cumulative indexes are assembled decennially. In addition, articles are abstracted and indexed in *America: History and Life*, *Historical Abstracts*, *Index to Literature on the American Indian*, and the *Combined Retrospective Index to Journals in History, 1838-1974*.

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# When John Barleycorn Went Into Hiding in Wisconsin

By Paul W. Glad

ON January 16, 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment became a part of the Constitution of the United States. According to its terms, the manufacture, sale, and transportation of intoxicating liquors were to be prohibited exactly one year later, and the nation prepared for a long drought. When the day of national desiccation finally arrived, evangelist Billy Sunday held a funeral service for John Barleycorn in Norfolk, Virginia. Ten thousand people attended the obsequies, which began with the arrival of a special train from Milwaukee presumably bearing the corpse in a twenty-foot coffin. With his Satanic Majesty trailing behind in deep anguish, the cortege proceeded from the railroad station to the tabernacle where Sunday greeted the procession with undisguised glee. "Good-bye, John," crowed the evangelist. "You were God's worst enemy; you were hell's best friend. I hate you with a perfect hatred. I love to hate you."<sup>1</sup>

But something was amiss. The coffin that Billy Sunday addressed with such exuberance was empty. John Barleycorn was not dead. Indeed, he had never left Milwaukee. He had gone underground, to be sure, but he had not been interred for all eternity. He remained alive and well; he had simply retreated into

hiding in Wisconsin and throughout the nation.

Just before the arrival of the Great Depression a decade later, a University of Wisconsin student from Viroqua wrote a term paper on his home town. One lively section of that paper bore the heading "The Prohibition Question," and the student introduced his discussion with these observations:

This is rather a misleading title as there is no Prohibition question in Viroqua. There can't be. There is no Prohibition. Either the people have not heard of the great mistake of 1918 or they are deliberately disobeying it. I rather think it is the latter. Despite the efforts of the W.C.T.U., the city officials, and numerous long nosed people with plenty of time on their hands, there has been, is, and always will be, plenty of stimulating fluids in Viroqua. Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging, and beer—beer is two bits a quart.

There are no speak-easies in Viroqua. If you should happen by a dispensary and hear the wassail, lusty songs and feminine laughter that is always in evidence, speakeasy is the last term you would think of.

Following the introduction came a list of fifty-one persons and establishments engaged in selling liquor to the citizenry. Some of them were notable enough to merit brief characterizations or descriptions. "Put a couple of cloves in [Clarence's] nose and it would be mistaken for a ham." Harold had eyes "like a couple of

EDITOR'S NOTE: This paper was originally delivered at the Founders Day meeting on February 24, 1984, in Madison.

<sup>1</sup>New York Times, January 17, 1920; Charles Merz, *The Dry Decade* (Garden City, New York, 1930), 1; John Kobler, *Ardent Spirits* (New York, 1973), 12–13.





*The Moonlight Outing Club, Muskego Lake, July 4, 1913.*

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fried eggs." Shorty was "loquacious when drunk and always loquacious." Skinny was Viroqua's "standing argument for prohibition. . . . He has one great ambition—to get as drunk as he can as quick as he can and stay that way as long as he can. He is an absolute martyr to this ambition."<sup>2</sup>

How seriously are we to take this assessment of the Eighteenth Amendment's ineffectiveness, an assessment that the Viroqua student shared with many of his classmates? The prohibition effort is a challenge to the analytical abilities of historians. It involved complex relationships among ethnic groups, economic interests, religious beliefs, and political objectives. To understand the Dry Decade we must concern ourselves with the attitudes of Americans before prohibition, the influences that led to ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment, the problems involved in enforcement of the Constitution, and the movement that brought about repeal. We must also attempt an assessment of what the dries believed was a noble experiment and what critics called the lie of the land. To begin, however, we must understand how prohibition came to

have a symbiotic relationship with other American reform movements in the nineteenth century.

THE initial settlement of the New World occurred at a time when the consumption of distilled spirits, especially gin, was on the rise in Europe. Although gin never became popular in colonial America, the colonists proved adept in the production of fermented beverages and distilled spirits from the grains and fruits at hand. Drinking became a central feature of colonial life, as beer and cider provided standard beverages at the dinner table, and as colonists celebrated weddings, baptisms, ministerial ordinations, militia musters, and funerals with generous libations.<sup>3</sup> By the time of the American Revolution, the per capita consumption of absolute alcohol for everyone over fifteen years of age was about six gallons a year—more than double the amount Americans consume today. Yet drinking seldom led to morbidity in the colonial period. Officials had the statutory power to deal with alcohol-

<sup>2</sup>Cyrus M. Butt III, "Viroqua," paper in Student Records, Experimental College, Class 4 (1930–1932), College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin Archives, Madison.

<sup>3</sup>Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America* (New York, 1982), 6–14; W. J. Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic: An American Tradition* (New York, 1979), 25–38.



A dance hall in Milwaukee, before Prohibition.

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related problems, and colonists credited alcohol with producing personal and social benefits in health and happiness. The Founding Fathers of the Republic were bibbers. George Washington drank a home brew with a molasses base, and Benjamin Franklin produced a spruce beer. James Madison, for whom the capital city of Wisconsin was named, commonly consumed a pint of whiskey a day, most of it before breakfast. During the War of Independence, the Continental Army sought to provide a daily liquor ration of four ounces for the prevention of disease.<sup>4</sup>

Although drunkenness helps to account for some military inefficiencies during the Revolution, that was not the reason for the first efforts to reduce the consumption of alcohol that coincided with the winning of independence. More importantly, the Revolutionary era, with its erosion of deferential patterns, aroused concern for social stability. Benjamin Rush, a Philadelphia physician and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, was the most prominent and important of those persons troubled by the disruptive consequences of heavy tipping. In 1784 he produced *An Inquiry into the Effects of Spiritous Liquors*, an essay which became a model for later temperance publications.<sup>5</sup>

In large part as a result of Rush's efforts, the citizens of several states began substituting

fermented beverages for distilled spirits before the end of the eighteenth century. Despite a growing opposition to hard liquor, however, the available data suggest that in the early years of the Republic drinkers were imbibing more than ever. By 1830, per capita consumption for the population over fifteen years of age was in excess of seven gallons of raw alcohol a year, more than at any other time in American history.<sup>6</sup> Like other countries where consumption rates were high, most notably Scotland and Sweden, the United States was agricultural, sparsely populated, and geographically isolated from foreign markets. Abundant grain went to the distilleries, and ease of distribution made whiskey an article of trade as well as a standard American drink.<sup>7</sup>

As rates of consumption approached record heights, other influences were also at work. Expansion of the frontier, the coming of new immigrants, and the first indications of

<sup>4</sup>Norman H. Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil* (New York, 1976), 18–21; Lender and Martin, *Drinking in America*, 6.

<sup>5</sup>Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic*, 39–46; Lender and Martin, *Drinking in America*, 36–40.

<sup>6</sup>Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 20. Clark sets the per capita consumption at about ten gallons. Lender and Martin provide a table on consumption estimates over time. See *Drinking in America*, 196–197.

<sup>7</sup>Rorabaugh, *The Alcoholic Republic*, 10–11.



an approaching industrial transformation all seemed to threaten community cohesion and stability. The times demanded reform if republican values were to remain credible, and the temperance movement gained strength along with the movements for women's rights, the abolition of slavery, and a host of other reforms.<sup>8</sup> By reinforcing the efforts of organizations formed to reduce the consumption of spirits, the reform impulse did much to moderate American drinking habits. The American Temperance Society, established in 1826 through the efforts of reformers and clergymen such as Lyman Beecher, led the attempt to bring about sobriety through moral suasion.<sup>9</sup> But to ardent opponents of drink, moral suasion alone was insufficient. For them, nothing but statutory prohibition of alcohol would suffice.

A leader in the movement to secure legislation prohibiting the sale of beverage alcohol was Neal Dow, a prominent businessman in the state of Maine and mayor of Portland. Throughout the 1840's Dow stumped the state for his cause, and in 1851 his efforts produced the first real prohibition law in American history.<sup>10</sup> Passage of the Maine law encouraged temperance workers in other states, including Wisconsin, to strive for similar legislation. Although the Wisconsin legislature passed two prohibition bills in 1855, Governor William A. Barstow vetoed both. Since Barstow was a Democrat, the Republicans might have been expected to continue the fight for a Maine law in Wisconsin. They did not do so, however, for Republicans were beginning to turn their undivided attention to the slavery question. Then the Civil War intervened, and for a time prohibition virtually disappeared as a political issue.<sup>11</sup>

**Y**ET the cause did not die. According to prohibitionist lore, Abra-

ham Lincoln remarked on the day of his assassination that "after reconstruction the next great question will be the overthrow and suppression of the legalized liquor traffic." Whether or not the martyred president had in fact voiced such sentiments, leaders of the Prohibition party, founded in 1868, looked to antebellum abolitionism for a model they could adapt to the new needs of American society after Appomattox. Thus the party platform demonstrated concern for a means of incorporating and dominating a broad range of reforms. During the economically troubled 1890's the party made advances towards fusion with other organizations such as the Populist party, organizations pledged to improve the lot of a downtrodden humanity. In the political struggles of that decade, however, the broad-gauge Prohibitionists lost out to a faction of the party that emphasized the single issue symbolized by the dispensary of spirits: the saloon. The party's effectiveness declined, and by the time prosperity returned at the close of the century, control over the prohibition movement was passing to the Anti-Saloon League.<sup>12</sup>

Saloons were indeed a problem at the turn of the century. By 1909 there was one saloon for every 300 Americans. The nation had more saloons than it had schools, libraries, theaters, parks, or churches. Saloonkeepers encouraged prostitutes, gamblers, and petty criminals. To increase business, they provided free drinks to new customers, most of them adolescents. Saloons posed a threat to industrial productivity, for they reduced the efficiency of workers. They also posed a threat to women. They were a means of sexual exploitation, and they fostered attitudes that sanctioned sexual exploitation.<sup>13</sup>

As women became attracted to the cause of women's rights after the Civil War, it was logical that they should oppose the saloon. The Woman's Christian Temperance Union began in Ohio in 1874, but it was to Frances Willard, who had grown up on a farm near Janesville,

<sup>8</sup>Lender and Martin, *Drinking in America*, 34-40, 52-54.

<sup>9</sup>Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 32-35; Kobler, *Ardent Spirits*, 52-58; Joseph R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement* (Urbana, 1963), 42-43.

<sup>10</sup>Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 35-40, 43-50; Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*, 42-43.

<sup>11</sup>Richard N. Current, *The History of Wisconsin, Volume II: The Civil War Era, 1848-1873* (Madison, 1976), 215-217, 225-226.

<sup>12</sup>Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 50; Jack S. Blocker, Jr., *Retreat from Reform: The Prohibition Movement in the United States, 1890-1913* (Westport, Connecticut, 1976), 77-78, 103-106; Andrew Sinclair, *Era of Excess: A Social History of the Prohibition Movement* (New York and Evanston, 1962), 84-85.

<sup>13</sup>Lender and Martin, *Drinking in America*, 102-108; Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 53-57; Kobler, *Ardent Spirits*, 174-176.



Albert Liss's saloon in the "Devil's Elbow" section of Stevens Point.

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that the WCTU owed its success. Serving as president of the organization until her death in 1898, Willard campaigned assiduously against the saloon. After the presidential campaign of 1880, she helped organize the Home Protection party to promote what she called the "politics of the mother heart." Within a few years she was optimistically offering some kind words, as she put it, "for the movement that is revolutionizing the outlook of our brothers and sisters who are wage-workers and through which temperance and the elevation of women are making such progress as seems well-nigh magical."<sup>14</sup>

Willard's WCTU had greater staying power than did the Prohibition party, and after the failure of political fusion in the nineties, it continued its battles in cooperation with the Anti-Saloon League. Both organizations sought to ally themselves with the prosperous and influential members of communities they hoped to win for their cause.<sup>15</sup> A Wisconsin

branch of the Anti-Saloon League formed in 1898, and it vigorously sought support from the respectable middle class. As state superintendent for Wisconsin, the Reverend Thomas M. Hare provided a hint of what the League stood for when he commented on the organization's national convention in 1905. The delegates, he observed, were not "long-haired, wild-eyed, squeaky voiced cranks," but persons of stature and substance. Skeptical of reform on several fronts, he took comfort from "the absence of the extreme and visionary element usually so prominent in reform gatherings."<sup>16</sup> Such attitudes suggest that when prohibitionists focused most of their attention on eliminating the saloon, they were in effect avoiding serious challenge to the social and economic standards of middle-class Americans.

Although the Anti-Saloon League boasted of astonishing success in mobilizing dry voters across the country during the first decade of the twentieth century, it met stubborn resistance in Wisconsin. The brewing industry, centered in Milwaukee, had grown since its

<sup>14</sup>Mary Earhart, *Frances Willard, from Prayers to Politics* (Chicago, 1944), 24-39, 195-196, 215-220, 230-244; Ruth Bordin, *Women and Temperance* (Philadelphia, 1981), 117-139.

<sup>15</sup>Robert H. Wiebe, *The Search for Order, 1877-1920* (New York, 1967), 89-90; Blocker, *Retreat from Reform*, 207.

<sup>16</sup>Blocker, *Retreat from Reform*, 208; Jeffrey Lucker, "The Politics of Prohibition in Wisconsin, 1917-1933" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1968), 2-3.





Emptying the last bottle after a saloon raid in Polar, Langlade County, June 1, 1933.

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origins in the 1840's to become one of the state's most important industries in value added by manufacture. By 1910, Wisconsin ranked third among the states in the production of malt liquors and second in the production of malt.<sup>17</sup> An economic interest of such size could not be expected passively to accept a program for bringing about its own destruction, and the Wisconsin Brewers' Association exerted considerable influence against the Anti-Saloon League. Allied with the brewers were various ethnic groups, particularly the Germans. During the 1850's, it was they who had most adamantly opposed a Maine law for the state. And in the years before 1914, the *Deutsche-Amerikanische National-Bund* (German-American Alliance) took an almost mystic delight in all things German, including the *Gemütlichkeit* of the beer hall. As George Sylvester Viereck, editor of *The Fatherland*, later observed, leaders of the Alliance "appealed exclusively to *Deutschtum*, but the Golden Grail of their idealism was filled to the brim with lager beer."<sup>18</sup>

The dominant religious affiliations among German-Americans, the Catholic and Lutheran churches, also exerted an influence

over attitudes towards prohibition in Wisconsin. While the Anti-Saloon League secured its most enthusiastic support from Protestant churches deriving their vitality from an evangelical emphasis, the differing theological and organizational perspectives of the Catholic and Lutheran churches allowed members of both to oppose prohibition. To the evangelicals, conversion was a profoundly moving individual encounter with the Almighty that involved "getting right with God"; for at least some of the converted, pledges of abstinence may have come to hold a special place as passports to eternity. Joining the evangelicals in support of prohibition were advocates of a Social Gospel that emphasized the importance of improving conditions in this world while preparing for the next.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, neither the

<sup>17</sup>Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census of the United States Taken in the Year 1910, Supplement for Wisconsin* (Washington, 1913), 667.

<sup>18</sup>George Sylvester Viereck, *Spreading the Germs of Hate* (New York, 1930), 326; *National German-American Alliance* (Hearings Before the Subcommittee on the Judiciary, United States Senate, 65 Cong., 2 sess., Washington, 1919), 224; Lucker, "Politics of Prohibition," 3; Sinclair, *Era of Excess*, 119-120.

<sup>19</sup>James H. Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive*



German Catholics nor the German Lutherans placed much emphasis upon traumatic conversions, and theological as well as ethnic influences limited the Social Gospel's appeal for Germans of both persuasions.

There were, of course, variations of attitude towards prohibition within each confession. In the Catholic church the fight over alcohol usage was part of a broader battle over Americanization, with the Americanizers urging total abstinence as a way of overcoming stereotypes that associated drunkenness with certain immigrant groups. During the nineteenth century the Irish, in particular, had gained notoriety as hard drinkers. When the prohibition movement grew in strength under Anti-Saloon League leadership after 1900, Irish acculturationists began to favor it as a means of overcoming the Irish reputation for insobriety.<sup>20</sup> Identifying themselves with liberal Catholics who worked for adaptation to American society, they won some important victories for Irish respectability. They proved so persuasive, in fact, that even some Germans began to consider the merits of their arguments. By 1913 the Central-Verein, the principal organization of German Catholics in the United States, had conceded that alcoholism was "a very grave danger to the welfare of our people" and had recommended that it be opposed within the Catholic church.<sup>21</sup> Most German Catholics, however, found a great difference between the whiskey-swilling Irish reprobate and the honest burgher enjoying his "continental Sunday" in the *Biergarten*. Though living in a new land, they were reluctant to forsake customs that in Germany had

never seemed inconsistent with either decent living or church teaching. More than their Irish coreligionists, therefore, the Germans tended to be conservative in belief and traditional in practice. And the most liberal of German Catholics tended to be far less amenable to prohibition than were the liberal Irish.<sup>22</sup>

For different reasons, the Lutherans also divided along lines of national origin in their attitudes towards prohibition. Influenced by a nineteenth-century pietistic reform movement in Scandinavia, the Scandinavian-Americans had moved much closer to the evangelical denominations of the United States than had the Germans. Swedish Lutherans of the Augustana Synod were perhaps the most committed—first to temperance reform and then to prohibition.<sup>23</sup> Augustana Lutherans had long been troubled by spiritual complacency and clerical conservatism in the established church of Sweden; with migration to the United States they found abundant opportunity for their evangelical enthusiasm. Joining the Swedes in the campaign against insobriety were many of the Norwegians and the General Synod, an association of older, primarily English-speaking Lutherans.<sup>24</sup>

Unlike the evangelical Scandinavians, the German Lutherans were not given to emotional enthusiasm but were, instead, preoccupied with working out clear statements of doctrine. Beginning with insistence upon both the Old and New Testaments as the written Word of God and as the only rule of faith and life, most German Lutherans held to confessional writings of the sixteenth century as the pure, unadulterated explanation of the Word of God. They resisted such deviations as pietism, rationalism, and modernism, and they could accept neither prohibition nor the Social Gospel as having anything to do with the effi-

*Movement, 1900–1920* (Cambridge, 1963), 18–21, 23–29; Sinclair, *Era of Excess*, 64–68; Peter H. Odegard, *Pressure Politics: The Story of the Anti-Saloon League* (New York, 1928), 30–35; Blocker, *Retreat from Reform*, 165–166; Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York, 1970), 212–213.

<sup>20</sup>Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement*, 31–32; Philip Gleason, *The Conservative Reformers: German-American Catholics and the Social Order* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1968), 37; Sister Joan Bland, *Hibernian Crusade: The Story of the Catholic Total Abstinence Union of America* (Washington, 1951), 267; Dennis J. Clark, "The Irish Catholics," in Randall M. Miller and Thomas D. Marzlik, eds., *Immigrants and Religion in Urban America* (Philadelphia, 1977), 61; Robert F. Bales, "Attitudes toward Drinking in Irish Culture," in David J. Pittman and Charles R. Snyder, eds., *Society, Culture, and Drinking Patterns* (New York, 1962), 157–187.

<sup>21</sup>Gleason, *The Conservative Reformers*, 157.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 37–39; Robert D. Cross, *The Emergence of Liberal Catholicism in America* (Cambridge, 1958), 71, 89–90, 108, 124–129; Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement*, 31–32, 118–119; Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*, 56–57.

<sup>23</sup>George M. Stephenson, *The Religious Aspects of Swedish Immigration: A Study of Immigrant Churches* (Minneapolis, 1932), 7–8, 17–22, 374; Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement*, 5–6.

<sup>24</sup>E. Clifford Nelson, ed., *The Lutherans in North America* (Philadelphia, 1975), 326–327, 417–418; Harald Runblom and Hans Norman, eds., *From Sweden to America: A History of the Migration* (Minneapolis, 1976), 116–119; Nicholas C. Burckel, ed., *Racine: Growth and Change in a Wisconsin County* (Racine, 1977), 498.





A Pi Kappa Alpha costume party at the University of Wisconsin, 1927. Photo by M. E. Diemer.

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cacy of God's love, the only means by which a sinful mankind might be saved. Thus the German Lutherans of the Ohio, Buffalo, Missouri, Iowa, and Wisconsin Synods often stood alone, isolated from other Lutherans as well as from Anti-Saloon League efforts to purify American society by destroying the liquor traffic. Opposing the Catholic church with increasing virulence as the four hundredth anniversary celebration of the Reformation approached in 1917, the German Lutherans nevertheless found themselves united with German Catholics in their antagonism towards Anti-Saloon League objectives.<sup>25</sup>

WHETHER German-American hostility to prohibition was primarily ethnic or whether it was religious, the coming of World War I effectively neutralized German influence in American society. In the midst of the preparedness campaign, plots and rumors of plots, rallies to fan the

flames of patriotic fires, and concerted efforts to portray Kaiser Wilhelm as the diabolical leader of a band of Huns, anxieties over the loyalty of Wisconsin began to mount. The state's combined immigrant and first-generation German-Austrian population was about 700,000 out of 2,300,000 residents.<sup>26</sup> A majority of its citizens had German-speaking ancestors, and in other parts of the country supporters of the war effort took to calling Wisconsin the "traitor state." When journalist Ray Stannard Baker visited Wisconsin in the summer of 1917, he reported to William Allen White that he found it "really the most backward state I've struck in its sentiment toward

<sup>25</sup>Myron A. Marty, *Lutherans and Roman Catholicism: The Changing Conflict, 1917-1963* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1968), 4-5; Nelson, *The Lutherans in North America*, 173-185; Dean Wayne Kohlhoff, "Missouri Synod Lutherans and the Image of Germany, 1914-1945" (doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1973), 32-33, 152-154, 179.

<sup>26</sup>*Capital Times* (Madison), May 6, 1918.



The soft-drink bar, portions of which can be seen at the back of the preceding picture.  
Photo by M. E. Diemer.

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the war."<sup>27</sup> Sensitive to the indictment of their commonwealth, patriots organized the Wisconsin Loyalty Legion to root out sedition and to extirpate the Teutonic influences they found on every hand. To assist in that objective, the *New York Sun* in 1918 published what it identified as a "Sedition Map." Based on information provided by the Loyalty Legion, it labeled as disloyal the counties in a triangle from Milwaukee and Manitowoc on Lake Michigan to Richland County in the west. Outside that triangle, Green, La Crosse, and Marathon counties appeared as islands of pro-Germanism.<sup>28</sup>

With anti-German sentiment running high and with wartime needs for men and materiel a prime consideration, many Americans became amenable to patriotic coercion. In a fa-

mous essay published in the *New Republic*, philosopher John Dewey argued that the war represented a "plastic juncture" in history. Coercion could become a threat, to be sure, but Dewey thought that the war had brought the creation of agencies to promote "the public and social interest over the private and possessive interest." In short, the war experience could teach "intelligent men" how to construct a better world. Among other things, wartime needs "added to the old lessons of public sanitary regulation the new lesson of social regulation for purposes of moral prophylaxis," and Dewey cited new efforts to control the traffic in alcoholic beverages as a part of the same war-inspired impulse.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Samuel Hopkins Adams, "Invaded America: Wisconsin Joins the War," *Everybody's Magazine*, 38: 28 (January, 1918); Walter Goodland to Alfred Bench, September 12, 1917, in the Wisconsin Loyalty Legion Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

<sup>29</sup>John Dewey, *Characters and Events: Popular Essays in Social and Political Philosophy* (New York, 1929), II: 551-560.

<sup>27</sup>Ray Stannard Baker to William Allen White, June 8, 1917, in the William Allen White Papers, Division of Manuscripts, Library of Congress. Baker, Michigan-born, had grown up in St. Croix Falls, Wisconsin.



War had come, in fact, just as the Anti-Saloon League was mounting a massive offensive of its own. Responding to dry pressure in 1913, Congress had passed the Webb-Kenyon Act, a measure that prohibited interstate commerce in alcoholic beverages wherever their importation violated state or local laws. Fearful that the cause might languish if prohibitionists settled for such limited legislation, League leaders determined to press on towards a constitutional amendment.<sup>30</sup> With American entry into the war, they campaigned for closing the saloons as part of an efficient war effort. Professor Irving Fisher, a Yale University economist, wrote the University of Wisconsin's Edward A. Ross that prohibition "would save enough grain alone to make a loaf of bread for each of eleven million fighting men." Prohibition would also allow army and navy physicians "to reduce greatly those contagious diseases that are the most prevalent among both soldiers and sailors."<sup>31</sup>

Having committed the nation to war, Congress quickly passed a series of acts to facilitate victory. It had already enacted prohibition laws for Alaska and the District of Columbia, as well as a law to eliminate liquor advertisements. Now, with the passage of the Selective Service Act, it set up "dry zones" around every military installation and forbade selling or giving liquor to any member of the armed forces. In an amendment to the Lever Food and Fuel Control Act, it forbade the use of foodstuffs in the manufacture of distilled spirits for beverage purposes. By presidential proclamation, Woodrow Wilson limited the alcoholic content of beer to 2.75 percent. (The few should do without drink, argued the dregs, so that the

many might have food.)<sup>32</sup> Along with these measures, Congress passed a resolution calling for a constitutional amendment to prohibit the manufacture, sale, transportation, and exportation of intoxicating liquors. Transmitted to the states in December, 1917, the proposed amendment brought on the climactic debate over prohibition in an atmosphere of wartime tension and acute hostility towards Germany and all things German.<sup>33</sup>

TRUE to form, despite the risk of being misunderstood, most German-Americans in Wisconsin opposed the prohibition amendment. Lay and clerical leaders alike urged their followers to be temperate in all things, but they worried about the threat to freedom they detected in the constitutional tinkering of the Anti-Saloon League. During the summer of 1918, Archbishop Sebastian G. Messmer of Milwaukee sent out a circular letter arguing that "there is a strong sectarian power back of the present prohibition movement." Suspecting that sinister enemies of the Catholic church were using the reform as a stalking-horse to attack her "in the most sacred mystery entrusted to her," he forbade "pastors of parishes in this Archdiocese from allowing any prohibition speeches to be given on any premises, be it the church, the school or a hall."<sup>34</sup>

Lutheran congregations of the Missouri and Wisconsin synods took a similar position. "We can see no good whatever in a church's espousing any outside cause," commented a writer in the *Northwestern Lutheran*. "Least of all so messy a cause as prohibition, involved as it is with plots and counterplots, with spying and detective work, with smug hypocrisy and

<sup>30</sup>Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement*, 159-163; Blocker, *Retreat from Reform*, 214-217, 227-229; Peter R. Weisensel, "The Wisconsin Temperance Crusade to 1919" (master's thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1965), 142; Lucker, "The Politics of Prohibition in Wisconsin," 3-8; William T. Enjue, *A Fighting Editor* (Madison, 1968), 263-264, 271-273; *The Anti-Saloon League Year Book, 1918*, p. 322.

<sup>31</sup>Fisher to Ross, April 23, 1917, in the Ross Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin; Julius Weinberg, *Edward Abner Ross and the Sociology of Progressivism* (Madison, 1972), 169-170. "Every possible advantage should be taken to make America's assistance in the war immediate and effective," commented one Wisconsin newspaper, "and one of the most apparent changes needed to secure efficiency and results is the need of abolishing every saloon and brewery in the nation." *Waupaca County Post*, April 18, 1918.

<sup>32</sup>Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 118-128; Ernest H. Cherrington, *The Evolution of Prohibition in the United States of America: A Chronological History of the Liquor Problem and the Temperance Reform in the United States from the Earliest Settlements to the Consummation of National Prohibition* (Publication No. 40, Patterson Smith Reprint Series in Criminology, Law Enforcement, and Social Problems, Montclair, New Jersey, 1969), 318, 332, 354-355.

<sup>33</sup>Cherrington, *Evolution of Prohibition*, 353; Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 129-130; Lender and Martin, *Drinking in America*, 129-130; Kobler, *Ardent Spirits*, 206-212; *Congressional Record*, 65 Cong., 1 sess., 5548-5560, 5584-5590; *ibid.*, 65 Cong., 2 sess., 337, 422-470, 477-478, 490.

<sup>34</sup>Archbishop Sebastian G. Messmer to all priests of the Archdiocese, June 17, 1918, Archdiocese Archives, St. Francis Seminary, Milwaukee.



*Fresh buttermilk was available at Art Gerth's bar on the corner of Twelfth and Chambers in Milwaukee, about 1925.*

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cant."<sup>35</sup> Later, after the Eighteenth Amendment had been ratified, the same commentator suggested that three interests were behind the facade of the Anti-Saloon League's moral reform. The first was the Rockefeller interest, which "absorbs the corn output, and by removing the brewer and distiller hopes to buy all the corn at lowest prices." Second were the meat packers, who expected cheaper meat and greater profits to result from lower grain prices, and the canners, who looked forward to new markets in "grape-juice and other products to take the place of the vanished cheer." The third interest behind prohibition included "the manufacturers of certain beverages, such as Coca-Cola, which is said to contain habit-forming drugs."<sup>36</sup> From the Lutheran perspective, the proper work of the church was preaching the Gospel; identifying the Kingdom of God with a saloonless society reduced the church's responsibility to "the

perforation of bungholes," an activity that served not God but mammon.<sup>37</sup>

It goes without saying that Wisconsin's brewers and distillers also opposed the amendment, but their arguments are worth passing notice. An advertisement of the Wisconsin Brewers' Association, for example, suggested that the war crisis had led to an increase in the power of the national government in Washington, but that sound policy demanded the return of powers surrendered by the states. Using the flag as a mantle for producers of alcoholic beverages, another advertisement pointed out that "the United

<sup>35</sup>H. K. M., "A Few Results of Prohibition," in *Northwestern Lutheran*, 3: 162 (November 7, 1916).

<sup>36</sup>H. K. M., "The Prohibition Amendment is Winning," in *Northwestern Lutheran*, 6: 9-10 (January 26, 1919). At least one prominent dry, William T. Evjue, agreed with H. K. M. Elected to the state assembly in 1916, Evjue had sponsored a bill calling for a statewide referendum on prohibition. By 1918, however, he had become disillusioned with the Anti-Saloon League because he thought it represented reactionary interests. Evjue, *Fighting Editor*, 269; *Capital Times* (Madison), April 11 and 27, 1919; Lucker, "The Politics of Prohibition in Wisconsin," 15.

<sup>37</sup>Kohlhoff, "Missouri Synod Lutherans," 152-153.





Another nonalcoholic party at the University of Wisconsin, Alpha Gamma Rho, 1928.

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States government is today collecting from the liquor industry alone in internal revenue more than enough money to pay each year [the] interest charge on all three Liberty Loans."<sup>38</sup>

In wartime Wisconsin, however, the most telling arguments were those advanced by the Anti-Saloon League and its allies. "We have German enemies across the water," charged one prohibitionist in denouncing the brewers. "We have German enemies in this country too. And the worst of all our German enemies, the most treacherous, the most menacing are Pabst, Schlitz, Blatz, and Miller." Patriots attacked "Schlitzville-on-the-Lake" for producing "Kaiser brew," and contended that German brewers contributed only to industrial disorder at a time when efficiency of production was in the national interest.<sup>39</sup>

In the end, it was not just argument but incessant campaigning and political pressure that finally produced ratification in Wisconsin. R. P. Hutton, Anti-Saloon League super-

intendent for the state, detailed the magnitude of his organization's effort. "We put on a country schoolhouse campaign. . . . We put factory experts to speak in the factories and got the companies to pay the men for listening. We built up a Council of One Thousand to back us—business and labor leaders. . . . We sold the factories billboards and posters which were changed bi-weekly. . . . We staged the biggest demonstration in Madison the state has ever seen. We ratified! and in the archives at Washington, Wisconsin was one of the thirty-six! We put it over."<sup>40</sup>

Hutton claimed too much. Wisconsin was not one of the thirty-six states necessary for ratification. It was the thirty-ninth state to ratify, but the point is inconsequential. The Amendment was ratified, and the Constitution now prohibited the manufacture, sale, and transportation of intoxicating liquors.<sup>41</sup>

The Constitution also provided that Congress and the several states should have concurrent power to enforce the article, although

<sup>38</sup>*Keokauke Enterprise*, July 12, 26, August 2, 9, 1917.

<sup>39</sup>Thomas C. Cochran, *The Pabst Brewing Company: The History of an American Business* (New York, 1948), 320; *The American Issue, Wisconsin Edition*, April, 1918; Odegard, *Pressure Politics*, 70.

<sup>40</sup>*Proceedings of the Nineteenth Convention of the Anti-Saloon League*, 1919, p. 322; Odegard, *Pressure Politics*, 179–180.

<sup>41</sup>*The Anti-Saloon League Year Book*, 1920, pp. 88, 212; Merz, *Dry Decade*, 315–316.

it specified no mechanism by which the concurrent power might be exercised. While Congress was working on an enforcement bill introduced by Congressman Andrew J. Volstead of Minnesota, the Wisconsin legislature was deliberating a bill introduced by Senator Charles Mulberger of Watertown. Passed over President Wilson's veto in October, 1919, the Volstead Prohibition Enforcement Code defined as intoxicating any liquor containing 0.5 per cent alcohol, and to the end that the use of such liquor might be prevented, trafficking in it was prohibited. Yet the law did not make the purchase of intoxicating liquor an act subject to prosecution. Other loopholes appeared in the form of several important concessions to drinkers. In the privacy of their own homes they could serve any intoxicating liquors acquired before passage of the Volstead Act. The thirsty could also produce cider, fruit juices, and other drinks for use in their own homes. These beverages were to be considered intoxicating only if a jury in each case determined that they were intoxicating in fact, whatever their alcoholic content. Finally, the Volstead Act permitted the sale of alcohol for medicinal, sacramental, and industrial purposes.<sup>42</sup>

In Wisconsin, the legislature passed the Mulberger Act in June, 1919. A disappointment to the dries, it legalized beer containing 2.5 percent alcohol. Yet it also provided that the alcoholic content established by Congress was to be accepted under state law. And when the United States Supreme Court upheld the authority of Congress to define "intoxicating liquor," the Anti-Saloon League came out in support of the Mulberger Act. In a statewide referendum held at the time of November elections in 1920, citizens of Wisconsin voted overwhelmingly to approve the statute.<sup>43</sup> They also elected John J. Blaine as governor. Blaine was not ardently wet, but neither was he an advocate of sumptuary legislation. As

governor, his principal concern was with enforcement of the law, and he believed new legislation necessary. Introduced by Senator Herman J. Severson of Iola, a new law passed the legislature and became effective on July 1, 1921. In signing the Severson bill, Blaine noted that "there can be no invasion of the home or any spying on family life under the bill, and it provides simplified machinery for enforcement."<sup>44</sup>

WITH legislation for carrying out the intent of the Eighteenth Amendment in place, one must ask how effectively it was enforced in Wisconsin. Perhaps the most popular view of the Dry Decade is essentially the same as that advanced by the student from Viroqua. It holds that violations of the law and of the Constitution were flagrant, that during prohibition Americans consumed more alcohol than ever before, and that flouting the Volstead Act betokened a disrespect for all law which in turn encouraged the development of organized crime. This was an assessment that began taking shape shortly after ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment, and it has continued to be a common interpretation ever since.

When Wisconsin newspapers reported the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919, many of them made it abundantly clear that they did not expect the state to become a Sahara. The *Rhineland New North* innocuously reminded readers that there was "still plenty of water in the old Wisconsin River," while the *Pierce County Herald* of Ellsworth pointed out that "sweet cider time will have an added significance this season."<sup>45</sup> A year later, with Congress setting up the machinery for prohibition enforcement, the *Herald* posed an editorial query: "How's your dandelion wine coming?" Simultaneously, the *Burlington Standard-Democrat* commented on the vain conceits of the Anti-Saloon League. "A beerless Milwaukee," noted the editor, "is like a beanless

<sup>42</sup>Congressional Record, 66 Cong., 1 sess., 2139, 2281, 2301, 2426-2443, 2445-2486, 2552-2573, 2775-2808, 2856-2905, 2949-2977, 2982, 3005, 3920, 4836-4852, 4892-4896, 4903-4908, 6681-6698, 6955, 7611, 7633-7634; *Anti-Saloon League Year Book, 1920*, pp. 89-95; Sinclair, *Era of Excess*, 168-169.

<sup>43</sup>*Wisconsin Senate Journal, 1919*, pp. 1243-1262; *Lives of Wisconsin, 1919*, Chs. 556, 685; Robert S. Maxwell, *Emanuel L. Philipp, Wisconsin Stalwart* (Madison, 1959), 182-183.

<sup>44</sup>*Capital Times* (Madison), May 27, 1921; *Milwaukee Journal*, June 7, 1921; Blaine to D. F. Burnham, June 30, 1921, Blaine to Annie Wyman Warren, February 10, 1925, and P— to Robert M. La Follette, Sr., January, 1924, in the Blaine Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>45</sup>*Rhineland New North*, July 3, 1919; *Pierce County Herald*, July 3, 1919.





Art Janik's Balcony Inn, Thirty-third and Lincoln, Milwaukee, probably in August, 1933.

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Boston—it can't be done. Milwaukeeans will have their favorite beverage even if they have to brew it themselves."<sup>46</sup> In 1921, the United States representative from Wisconsin's Second Congressional District, Edward Voigt of Sheboygan, articulated the same theme with an emphatic variation. "I believe that there is more bad whiskey consumed in the country today than there was good whiskey before we had prohibition," he wrote a constituent, "and of course we have made a vast number of liars and law violators through the Volstead Act."<sup>47</sup>

Both wets and dries were soon commenting on the ancillary effects of prohibition as well as on the way it affected drinking habits. When a former federal prohibition commissioner spoke in Medford to encourage respect for the Volstead Act, he emphasized the pernicious results of violating the law. "Moonshine," he contended in 1921, "is murdering many of our fellow citizens because the successful defiance of law . . . is encouraging general lawlessness, such as bank robberies, automobile murders, assaults, and other crimes."<sup>48</sup> In

1922, the school board of Mercer in Iron County complained to the governor that children going to and from school were "never free from the menace of moonshine crazed men." Without assistance in controlling the situation, warned the school board, "we will be justified in adopting some of the methods used by the Klu [sic] Klux Klan."<sup>49</sup>

James A. Stone, a Reedsburg attorney and former prohibition director for Wisconsin, expressed the fear that "the number of people who are indulging in moonshine in small places" was increasing during 1923. Perhaps it was such small places that provided a market for products of the Perfect Tinfoil Company of New York. In 1927, Stone reported that the firm was advertising "bottles, cartons, corks and other essentials to go with doctored gin. . . and whiskey." It also offered for sale "capping machines, caps, and bottles stamped . . . 'Hennessy [sic] Three Star,' 'Martell Three Star' and 'Bacardi.'"<sup>50</sup> For its part in the un-

<sup>46</sup>*Taylor County Star-News*, November 10, 1921.

<sup>46</sup>*Pierce County Herald*, July 1, 1920; *Burlington Standard-Democrat*, July 2, 1920.

<sup>47</sup>Voigt to Halbert Hoard, March 11, 1921, in the Halbert L. Hoard Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. The letter is quoted in David E. Kyvig, *Repealing National Prohibition* (Chicago, 1979), 25.

<sup>49</sup>Ida M. Harper, Fred E. Lee, and W. H. Hoffman to the Governor, Attorney General, and State Superintendent of Schools, October 25, 1922, copy enclosed in James A. Stone to William T. Eyjue, August 14, 1926, in the Stone Papers, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>50</sup>James A. Stone to Roy A. Haynes, April 16, 1927, in the Stone Papers.

dercover trade, Wisconsin was able to offer a commodity of its own in return. Eastern Wisconsin gained fame during the twenties as the home of package wort, a liquid made from malt. The process of manufacturing beer from wort is relatively simple, requiring mainly the addition of yeast.

By 1928, according to an article in the *Burlington-Standard Democrat*, Wisconsin was accounted "one of the wettest states west of the Alleghenies" despite the "thrift, industry and intelligence" of its citizens. Alcohol flowed among all classes in all parts of the state. "In some of the staid, old communities . . .," noted the *Standard-Democrat*, "one often finds old fashioned places with the old mahogany and the brass rail where beer is drawn at 25 cents a stein."<sup>51</sup>

To continue citing evidence of Volstead Act violations would require several volumes, and many Americans found such reports of lawlessness disturbing. In one of his first acts as president, Herbert Hoover in 1929 appointed a commission to consider the problem of criminal justice and to make recommendations for improving the administration of federal laws. Headed by George Wickersham, a former United States attorney general, the commission completed its investigations in 1930, and in January of the following year President Hoover transmitted its report to Congress. Although it did not suggest abandonment of the "noble experiment," it did provide a vast amount of information to reinforce the impression that violations of the Volstead Act were endemic throughout the land.

The Official Records of the Commission contained a section on Wisconsin, and if anything, it indicated that prohibition violations were even more common than anyone thought. According to a summary table in the records, only twenty of Wisconsin's seventy-one counties deserved to be called dry. (Even so, one wonders about the accuracy of the label. Viroqua is the county seat of Vernon County, which investigators reported as dry.)<sup>52</sup> In any case, Frank Buckley, who conducted the survey of Wisconsin, visited several

towns and cities, and in almost all of them alcoholic beverages could be obtained with ease. Volstead Act violators were treated in a straightforward, candid manner involving few admonitions or recriminations. Buckley attended police court in Superior and observed the daily collection of fines from proprietors of establishments selling booze. Before the judge had finished asking the defendant how he pleaded, "the violator in each case would reach into his pocket, extract therefrom a roll of bills, plead guilty, and place \$200 on the desk."<sup>53</sup>

In Madison, the investigator visited the Bush and identified "an attractive young Italian girl" as "the queen of the bootleggers." She "catered exclusively to a fraternity house clientele." At the University of Wisconsin, Buckley conferred with an assistant dean of women, who told him that she knew of "no drinking or revelry on the part of the young ladies under her supervision." Yet the dean impressed him "as one who would not be likely to be cognizant of such conditions."<sup>54</sup> Ignorance of the lawbreaking, he implied, was indicative of exceptional naivete. "Soft drink establishments, dispensing beverages of a harder variety than the name implies," flourished not only in Madison, but also in Sheboygan, Manitowoc, Green Bay, Appleton, Racine, and Kenosha. They flourished in Fond du Lac, too, but in that city the authorities frowned on "other forms of vice."<sup>55</sup> Milwaukee had the most efficient police force in the state, according to the report, but in March, 1930, prohibition agents seized twenty-four large stills, one of which was capable of producing twenty-five gallons of 190-proof liquor an hour.<sup>56</sup>

Despite the amassing of such evidence, the Wickersham Commission could not agree upon modification of the Eighteenth Amendment. Two commission members, Newton D. Baker and Monte M. Leman, favored repealing the Amendment and returning to the states the responsibility for liquor control. A third, Henry W. Anderson, argued for adapting Sweden's system of government-regulated liquor monopoly, and he won the support of several other commissioners, including Wick-

<sup>51</sup>*Burlington Standard-Democrat*, October 26, 1928.

<sup>52</sup>National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, *Enforcement of the Prohibition Laws: Official Records of the National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement* (71 Cong., 3 sess., Senate Document 307, volume 4), 1100-1101.

<sup>53</sup>*Ibid.*, 1102.

<sup>54</sup>*Ibid.*, 1103.

<sup>55</sup>*Ibid.*, 1103-1105.

<sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 1106.





*A bit of posturing at the Fuller and Johnson Manufacturing Company's power and light plant outing, Madison, about 1929.*

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ersham. Shortly before Hoover released the report, however, he announced that "the commission, by a large majority, does not favor the repeal of the eighteenth amendment as a method of cure for the inherent abuses of the liquor traffic." And he added, "I am in accord with this view."<sup>57</sup> What Hoover did, thought Walter Lippmann, "was to evade a direct and explicit confession that federal prohibition is a hopeless failure." Other critics were both puzzled and disappointed. "Is [Hoover's]

action either constructive or courageous?" queried *The Nation*. "Is his treatment of the report in his message of transmittal even honest?"<sup>58</sup>

**I**N the end, of course, the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed; but that was after the coming of the

<sup>58</sup>Walter Lippmann, "The Great Wickersham Mystery," in *Vanity Fair*, April, 1931, 41-42; "Confusion Worse Confounded," in *The Nation*, February 4, 1931. Both are quoted in Kyvig, *Repealing National Prohibition*, 114.

<sup>57</sup>Kyvig, *Repealing National Prohibition*, 113-114.

Great Depression and after Franklin D. Roosevelt had defeated Hoover in 1932. By that time, several states had expressed formal disapproval of prohibition, and Wisconsin was one of them. In 1926, Wisconsin had voted overwhelmingly in favor of amending the Volstead Act to permit the manufacture and sale of beer with 2.75 per cent alcohol. Only Congress could amend the act, however, and little came of the referendum. In April, 1929, citizens of Wisconsin voted to repeal the state's prohibition enforcement law, the Severson Act.<sup>59</sup>

A major influence in the passage of these referenda was the Association Against the Prohibition Amendment. Under the leadership of men such as Dr. J. J. Seelman, president of the Milwaukee Medical Society, and Fred Pabst, a heavy contributor to wet campaigns, the AAPA devoted great energy to repeal of the Severson Act. Governor Blaine, harassed by the problems of prohibition enforcement in Wisconsin, became a useful ally. As early as 1924, he was writing Fred Pabst:

Wisconsin has very good enforcement of the liquor laws, but if [the dries] are going to have absolute prohibition they will have to find some scheme of uprooting the grapevine, destroying the dandelion, the clover, and the hundreds of fruits out of which is made wine; then, to make the prohibition complete, the prohibition of the growing of corn, rye, barley, and other grains out of which malt and spirituous [sic] liquors may be made; and then, to make the prohibition absolutely complete, it would be necessary to have a law that would destroy practically the entire vegetable kingdom. And even when they got through with all this perfection, inventive ingenuity of the human race would probably be able to extract the necessary ingredients from the air, from the soil, or from the water.<sup>60</sup>

**I**N 1926, Governor Blaine campaigned for the senate seat occupied by Irvine Lenroot. Pledging loyalty to

"the will of the people as expressed in the referendum on the Wet and Dry question," and identifying Lenroot as a tool of special interests, Blaine was successful. He served only one term, but before leaving office he proposed a constitutional amendment for the repeal of prohibition. Modified to satisfy the AAPA and other antiprohibitionists, the Blaine resolution was quickly adopted and sent to the states. On December 5, 1933, Utah became the thirty-sixth state to ratify, and the Twenty-first Amendment became a part of the Constitution of the United States.<sup>61</sup>

What remains to be said about the Dry Decade? In recent years, historians, sociologists, and persons concerned with alcohol and drug abuse have been taking a fresh look at America's experience with prohibition. Among other things, they have been making a good case for a congeries of related arguments: that the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act were not just foolish aberrations of narrow-minded puritans; that prohibition was in fact far more effective in reducing ethanol consumption than what the foregoing discussion might lead one to believe; that prohibition modified American drinking habits and made possible the acceptance of moderation as the norm; that prohibition largely eliminated a foul and nefarious institution, the old-time saloon; and that the focus of attention today should not be on the prohibitionists, but on the nature of alcohol narcosis and the reasons for high rates of morbidity in some societies.<sup>62</sup>

I have attempted to show that during the 1920's the drinking habits of many citizens of Wisconsin represented a rejection of coercive reform and sumptuary legislation. I would not argue that this state became a haven for soaks and sots, bibbers and boozers. On the contrary, what is impressive in the evidence is not

<sup>59</sup>Grant County Progressive Republican Committee to Fellow Voter of Grant County, campaign letter enclosed in Christianson to Blaine, October 28, 1926, Blaine Papers; Kyvig, *Repealing National Prohibition*, 169-182.

<sup>62</sup>J. C. Burnham, "New Perspectives on the Prohibition 'Experiment' of the 1920's," in the *Journal of Social History*, 2: 51-68 (Fall, 1968); Joseph R. Gusfield, "Prohibition: The Impact of Political Utopianism," in John Braeman, Robert H. Bremner, and David Brody, eds., *Change and Continuity in Twentieth-Century America: The 1920's* (Columbus, 1968), 271-308; Lender and Martin, *Drinking in America*, 136-147; Clark, *Deliver Us from Evil*, 209-226.

<sup>59</sup>National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, *Enforcement of the Prohibition Laws*, IV: 1098-1099.

<sup>60</sup>Blaine to Pabst, October 3, 1924, in the Blaine Papers. See also Blaine to James Couzens, February 6, 1925, *ibid.*



the intensity with which people violated the Volstead Act in Wisconsin, but the moderation they exercised in breaking the law. One of the Wickersham Commission's investigators was puzzled by that very moderation. Wisconsin, he noted, had "large blocks of population coming directly from countries such as Germany and Poland, where the use of alcohol is an almost universal custom." Yet he could not explain "why there are not more open violations of the law than are apparent." Perhaps, he thought, it was because "the German element particularly were naturally inclined to orderliness and lawfulness."<sup>63</sup> He had a point, but I think his point could be applied to other ethnic groups with equal force.

At the University of Wisconsin, our Viroqua student had a classmate from Lohrville in Waushara County. Swedes and Italians were the first to arrive there in large numbers, and the Italians of Lohrville, like the Italians of Madison, were highly skilled stonecutters. In a section of his paper devoted to leisure-time activities, this scholarly son of Italian parents described the way Italian families would get together three or four times during the summer season and spend a day at the lake. This is what he wrote:

Each family furnishes their own meals, and a keg [of] beer and plenty of wine are

taken along and those who have a thirst have all the opportunities they could wish for to quench it. The day is really an interesting spectacle to witness, games are played, yarns are traded, old times and old friends are recalled, and a good time is had by all. When evening comes the three or four cars among the picnic goers make three and four trips from the town to the lake so that all the people are sure of getting to the lake and back home. All the transportation is furnished by the men who own the cars, and no charge is made or asked of the people. The remarkable thing about such a gathering is that the Italian people . . . can cooperate with each other for a day and with such cooperation we have the functioning to perfection of a social group.<sup>64</sup>

The Lohrville Italians were breaking the law, to be sure, but who would wish to raid their picnic and confiscate their wine? The superpatriots who had once identified Wisconsin as the "traitor state" might do so, but like the prohibitionists that many of them became, they took the trouble to understand neither the richness of Wisconsin's ethnic heritage, nor the ties that span social cleavages to allow for the building of true community, the kind of community that unites this state.

<sup>63</sup>National Commission on Law Observance and Enforcement, *Enforcement of the Prohibition Laws*, I: 59.

<sup>64</sup>Eugene Cappeletti, "A Regional Survey of Lohrville; Wisconsin," paper in Student Records, Experimental College, Class 4 (1930-1932), College of Letters and Science, University of Wisconsin Archives, Madison.

# WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

*The State Historical Society of Wisconsin • Vol. 59, No. 1 • Autumn, 1975*





# WISCONSIN MAGAZINE OF HISTORY

Published quarterly by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 816 State Street, Madison, Wisconsin 53706. Distributed to members as part of their dues. (Annual membership, \$7.50, or \$5 for those over 65 or members of affiliated societies; family membership, \$10, or \$7 for those over 65 or members of affiliated societies; contributing, \$25; business and professional, \$50; sustaining, \$100 or more annually; patron, \$500 or more annually.) Single numbers \$1.75. Microfilmed copies available through University Microfilms, 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106; reprint volumes available from Kraus Reprint Company, Route 100, Millwood, New York 10546. Communications should be addressed to the editor. The Society does not assume responsibility for statements made by contributors. Second-class postage paid at Madison and Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Copyright © 1975 by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Paid for in part by the Maria L. and Simeon Mills Editorial Fund and by the George B. Burrows Fund.

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Society's Iconographic Collection

*Lake Mills village green in the mid-1870's, a time when this small Jefferson County community was a regional center for Spiritualist activity. The photograph was made by Andreas L. Dahl of De Forest.*



# Spiritualism in Wisconsin in the Nineteenth Century

By Mary Farrell Bednarowski

IT IS customary to designate 1859, the publication year of Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, as the starting date of the religion-science conflict of the nineteenth century. But the battle between the churches and science over the theories and implications of evolution was merely a continuation of a struggle for authority that had been in existence, off and on, for centuries. Long before 1859—at the end of the eighteenth and in the beginning of the nineteenth centuries—science had begun divesting the universe of its supernatural qualities and calling into question the teachings of orthodox religion. Scholarship in such areas as archeology, anthropology, philology, comparative religions, and geology led to doubts about some of the truths of Christianity that believers had always taken for granted: the creation of the world by a benevolent, omnipotent God; the divinity of Christ; the survival of the soul after death.

Higher Criticism—Biblical criticism based upon scientific methods—was undermining the Bible, describing it as a collection of pious writings, human in origin. Anthropological and archeological studies revealed that man had lived on earth thousands of years previous to 6000–4000 B.C., the approximate date of creation generally accepted in the Christian world. Studies in comparative literature exposed the Song of Solomon as an Oriental love poem, and a fairly typical one at that. Advances in philology cast suspicion on the tra-

ditional explanation for the origin of languages—that they arose upon the destruction of the Tower of Babel. The study of comparative religions indicated that some of the truths most basic to Christian tradition—the Creation, the Deluge, a Messiah of divine origin, the Resurrection—had foundations in ancient pagan myths of pre-Christian times. And geological findings about the age of the earth caused doubt about the Creation account in Genesis.

The result of all this scholarship was religious skepticism in nineteenth-century culture, a gradual inability to believe in either the divine origins of the universe or in the efficacy of adhering to organized religion. The possibility that science could render religion obsolete had a liberating effect on some persons. Convinced that religion was based on superstition, and confident that, as Auguste Comte had predicted, religion would fade away as a necessary human institution, there were those who happily accepted their place in a materialist universe. But for many, what appeared to be the supplanting of religion by science brought only suffering. Torn between the desire to believe in a Supreme Being and the equally strong need to probe and to analyze with the tools of science, many persons of the nineteenth century found themselves in an agonizing intellectual dilemma. It was their misfortune to live, as an English historian put it, in one of those "trying periods of human history when devotion and

intelligence appear to be opposed."<sup>1</sup> The old beliefs were crumbling, and there was nothing with which to replace them except a horrible suspicion that man was abandoned in an indifferent universe, that "the grave appears to be the end of all, human goodness nothing but a name, and the sky above this universe a dead expanse, black with the void from which God himself has disappeared."<sup>2</sup>

It was during the middle of the nineteenth century, in this climate of doubt and anxiety, that American Spiritualism originated in 1848.<sup>3</sup> In March of that year Margaret and Kate Fox, the young daughters of farmer John Fox of Hydesville, in western New York, heard rappings and taps which came to be interpreted as evidence that the spirits of the dead were trying to contact the world of the living. Within months of the first rappings, Margaret and Kate were in Rochester, New York, developing their spirit-contacting powers under the tutelage of their married

sister Leah Fish. As news of the rappings spread throughout the Middle Atlantic states and New England, spirit circles<sup>4</sup> began to spring up in great numbers. Hundreds of people discovered that they, too, possessed the power to communicate with spirits, and the spirit manifestations began to increase in sophistication. The spirits not only rapped; they also moved furniture, played musical instruments, and poked and pinched living members of the spirit circles.

For many the spirit manifestations bespoke nothing more than a novelty, a sensational kind of parlor entertainment. But as bizarre as the spirit phenomena may seem, they nevertheless came to be interpreted by thousands as evidence that the spirits of the dead were trying to communicate with the world of the living in order to reveal indisputably that life exists beyond the grave. The spirit manifestations provided believers with the physical, laboratory evidence whereby religion would be put on the same footing as science. Through the spirit messages, believers became convinced that life went on beyond the grave much as it did on earth and that the spirit world, like the material world, was governed by natural laws which mankind could come to comprehend. This conviction led the Spiritualists to claim that theirs was a religion "separate in all respects from any existing sects, because it bases all its affirmations purely upon the demonstration of fact, science, and natural law, a law which applies to the natural and to the supernatural worlds alike."<sup>5</sup> As a religion based on knowledge, then, rather than belief, Spiritualism provided an alternative to the unquestioning faith demanded by traditional religions as well as to the belief in a totally materialistic world which was seemingly demanded by science.

There were only three tenets that were es-

<sup>1</sup> From James Anthony Froude, *History of England from the Fall of Wolsey to the Defeat of the Spanish Armada*, as quoted in Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven, Connecticut, 1957), 106.

<sup>2</sup> Stopford Brooke, *Life and Letters of Frederic W. Robertson*, quoted *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>3</sup> Certainly there was evidence of the belief in human communication with spirits long before 1848, particularly among the Shakers and the followers of Emanuel Swedenborg. But the Spiritualists themselves date the beginning of modern Spiritualism from 1848. There are several histories of Spiritualism available, although none is definitive. An older work is Frank Podmore's *Modern Spiritualism: A History and a Criticism* (London, 1902); a more recent volume is Slater Brown's *The Heyday of Spiritualism* (New York, 1970), a clear, though nonscholarly and occasionally sensationalist account of the history and background of nineteenth-century Spiritualism. Geoffrey Nelson treats British and American Spiritualism from a sociological perspective in *Spiritualism and Society* (New York, 1969); Howard Hastings Kerr analyzes the influence of Spiritualism on nineteenth-century American literature in *Mediums and Spirit-Rappers and Roaring Radicals* (Chicago, 1972); the author's unpublished dissertation interprets Spiritualism as an attempt to resolve the religion-science conflict of the nineteenth century. See Mary F. Bednarowski, "Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism: An Attempt at a Scientific Religion" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Minnesota, 1973). Another discussion of the connection between Spiritualism and science appears in R. Laurence Moore, "Spiritualism and Science: Reflections on the First Decade of the Spirit Rappings," in the *American Quarterly*, 24: 474-500 (October, 1972).

<sup>4</sup> Spirit circles were informal groups consisting of a medium, or one who professed to have highly developed psychic powers, and several followers, usually not more than ten or twelve. Spiritualist periodicals during the second half of the nineteenth century abounded with advice on the best physical and mental conditions for harmonious spirit circles.

<sup>5</sup> Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York, 1870), 17.





Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper

*A meeting of Spiritualists in Dodworth Hall, New York City, in the late 1860's.*

sentual to Spiritualism: "First, that man has a spirit; Second, that this spirit lives after death; Third, that it can hold intercourse with human beings on earth."<sup>6</sup> But from these basic beliefs there evolved a body of religious doctrine that offered its adherents a solution to the dilemma posed by the need to believe in an afterlife coupled with their inability to accept the existence of life after death on the basis of faith alone.

Because Spiritualism was always a loosely organized movement, the number of followers has never been determined exactly.<sup>7</sup> Within several years of its beginnings, however, Spir-

itualism had spread across the country, and there were spirit circles in every state of the Union and in many of the territories as well.

**W**ISCONSIN proved fertile ground for nurturing of Spiritualism. Within twenty years of the Hydes-

<sup>6</sup> Nathaniel P. Tallmadge to the Editor of the *Spiritual Telegraph*, January 22, 1859, in the Nathaniel P. Tallmadge Papers (microfilm edition, 1973), State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>7</sup> E. Branch Douglas estimates the number of Spiritualists at the height of the movement at one million, including all those who merely believed that the spirit manifestations were genuine. See *The Sentimental Years* (New York, 1934), 366-379. In *The Burned-over District* (Ithaca, New York, 1950), 349, Whitney Cross sets the count at one and a half million. In *Modern American Spiritualism*, Emma Hardinge Britten, a Spiritualist herself, states that there were eleven million Spiritualists in the United States in 1867, but that number seems highly optimistic.



ville rappings, spirit circles had sprung up in most cities of any size as well as in rural areas. There were regional organizations such as the Northwestern Wisconsin Spiritualists' Conference which held conventions in such places as River Falls and Oshkosh and conducted summer camps at Omro similar to the famous resort meetings at Lilydale in western New York. Spiritualists held regularly scheduled church services in Milwaukee, Madison, Janesville, Fond du Lac, and Appleton. A newspaper, the *Spiritualist*, was published for almost a year during 1868 in Appleton and Janesville. The only Spiritualist college in the nation, the Morris Pratt Institute, was built in Whitewater in 1888, flourishing there, and later in Milwaukee, well into the twentieth century. Until 1972, when the organization moved to Cassadaga, Florida, the National Spiritualist Association of Churches had its headquarters in Milwaukee. And to this day Spiritualists gather in the summer for lectures, seances, and healings in the small town of Wonevot in Juneau County.<sup>8</sup>

The state boasts famous and respected citizens who espoused the new belief. Ex-governor Nathaniel P. Tallmadge was an ardent believer in and defender of Spiritualism, as were Warren Chase, founder of Ceresco, the Fourierist community at Ripon, and Lyman C. Draper of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin. One of Spiritualism's most famous trance speakers, Cora L. V. Rich-

mond, began her career as a child healer in Lake Mills. Robert Schilling of Milwaukee, German-American labor reformer and editor, became a Spiritualist in his later years, and Peter Houston of Cambria, inventor of many of the attachments for the Eastman-Kodak camera, was a Spiritualist.<sup>9</sup> Ella Wheeler Wilcox was a Spiritualist during part of her life, as is evidenced by much of her poetry.

Assessing accurately the number of Spiritualists in Wisconsin in the nineteenth century is difficult for several reasons. First, there is a dearth of objective information about the movement. Newspapers frequently give information about the more sensational side of Spiritualism—news about the performances of various mediums, discoveries of frauds, and other scandals connected with Spiritualism. They also published routine notices of Spiritualist church services and of meetings and conventions in various parts of the state.

However, popular newspapers generally adopted a hostile attitude toward Spiritualism, and the *Milwaukee Sentinel* especially took an editorial stance that regarded Spiritualism as at best ridiculous and at worst dangerous to mental, physical, and spiritual health. The *Sentinel* noted the advent of the movement in Milwaukee in 1851 at the home of a Mr. Loomis, probably John M. Loomis of the Clarke and Loomis lumber firm. In the same issue a Milwaukee liquor firm, True and Hoyt, took advantage of this news to key an advertisement to puns on "spirits," who, "by their continual knockings . . . have succeeded in knocking out the bung of a cask of Brandy, and we are informed by *its spirit* to be the best in the State." Two weeks later the *Sentinel* scoffed at a report of rappings in Plymouth Congregational Church of which John J. Miter was minister. And on July 12, 1851, it prematurely predicted that "the 'Knocking' humbug seems to be at its last gasp."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Myfanwy Morgan Archer, "Wisconsin Man Inventor of Folding Film Roll Kodak Features," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 16: 237 (March, 1933). Archer adds that Houston used to make frequent visits to John Muir's Hickory Hill Farm, where the two men would fall into "heated wrangling" about the tenets of Spiritualism.

<sup>10</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 3, January 14, July

<sup>8</sup> There is no general history of Spiritualism in Wisconsin, but, perhaps due to the interests and influence of Lyman C. Draper, the State Historical Society of Wisconsin has an extensive collection of material on Spiritualism. In addition to numerous books, its holdings include folders of pamphlets; files of the *Shekinah*, *Spirit Messenger*, *Tiffany's Monthly*, and other Spiritualist periodicals; the annual proceedings of the National Conference of Spiritualists; relevant manuscript collections such as the Tallmadge Papers, the Draper Correspondence, the James C. Howard Papers, the John S. Williams Papers, the Ada L. James Papers, the Joseph Sprague Correspondence, the Simon Sherman Reminiscences, and letters from George White to Richard Stoughton and from Konrad Meidenbauer to his brother. In addition, the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, unlike virtually all other Wisconsin newspapers, has been indexed for much of the nineteenth century (1837 to 1879), and the index may be consulted at the Milwaukee Public Library for references to Spiritualist activities throughout the state.



Letters, diaries, periodicals, articles, sermons, biographies, and autobiographies written by the Spiritualists themselves reveal the motivations of those who espoused the new belief and the degree and nature of their involvement with it. With such sources as these, of course, it is necessary to go cautiously in order to gain objective evidence from ardent believers.

The statistical evidence is difficult to deal with also. In 1859 the *Sentinel* quoted the *Spiritual Register's* state-by-state membership statistics. The *Register* lists 70,000 Spiritualists in Wisconsin in 1859 and 80,000 in 1860.<sup>11</sup> Since the population of Wisconsin was 775,881 in 1860, 80,000 believers, more than 10 per cent, seems excessive. Coupled to this is the fact that Spiritualists notoriously overestimated the number of their followers and often included those who merely believed the spirit phenomena to be genuine but who did not engage in Spiritualist activities. On the other hand, the census of 1890, the first in which denominations reported membership, shows that there were 354 Spiritualists in Wisconsin. This number seems quite low in view of the fact that in 1895 there were four Spiritualist organizations, including one German-speaking group, in Milwaukee alone.<sup>12</sup>

AT just about the time that the *Milwaukee Sentinel* was prophesying the end of Spiritualism in 1851, it began to be apparent to some that the spirit

manifestations gave promise of revealing indisputable knowledge about the existence of life after death and that they thus could put an end to the religious skepticism and despair of the period. Among the first to see the religious significance of the spirit phenomena was Judge John Worth Edmonds of the State Supreme Court of New York, a convert to Spiritualism who was influential in the development of many Wisconsin Spiritualists, particularly Nathaniel P. Tallmadge,<sup>13</sup> who became convinced of the truth of Spiritualism when he attended seances in Washington, D.C., conducted by Margaret and Kate Fox. Edmonds had been drawn to seances while attempting to deal with his overwhelming grief after the death of his wife. Edmonds needed to believe in a life hereafter, but could not do so through faith alone. From his point of view Spiritualism offered the only consolation in a world which demanded a choice between the certain knowledge offered by science and the consolations of religion:

If it [Spiritualism] had, as it seemed to have, a most intimate connection with our religious faith, it was worth while to inquire what effect it was to have in that respect, and whether it was addressed most to those who already professed some religious sect, or to that still greater number who made no such professions and had no such connection. My intercourse with the world had taught me that most of the educated and intelligent among the people belonged to the latter class, and I found that many, very many, secretly felt as I did. They had heard and read so many contradictory statements, that they hardly knew

12, 1851. Along with its news articles the *Sentinel* frequently included editorial remarks. Even the reporting of a simple announcement occasioned a snide comment: the *Sentinel* reported that the Spiritualists would have a "Pic-Nic" in Elm Grove and added, "However prone they may be to commune with the soul, we presume they will go in a body," August 14, 1862.

<sup>11</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, February 7, February 9, 1860. The February 7, 1859, issue also includes the comment, "If the *Register* will now tell us in blazing numerals, how many wretches have lost their reason—how many have been hurried into eternity by suicide and murderous hands—how many families have been separated—how many wives sent adrift upon the streams of infamy—how many husbands wrecked, mentally and morally, and how many are now eking out, a life in our humane institutions—all through the agency of *Spiritualism*—we shall look upon the statistics as of infinitely greater importance."

<sup>13</sup> *Wisconsin Blue Book*, 1864, pp. 192-193; *Compendium of the 11th Census; 1890*, p. 305; *Milwaukee City Directory*, 1895, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Tallmadge made public his belief in Spiritualism when he defended Judge Edmonds from a published anonymous attack. He was a frequent visitor to Judge Edmonds' home in New York City, where he attended seances of the judge's spirit circle, the Circle of Hope. Tallmadge also wrote an appendix to Judge Edmonds' two-volume work, *Spiritualism*, in which he recounted his own experiences. Tallmadge's wife and children espoused Spiritualism also, and two of his daughters developed powers as psychics; according to Emma Hardinge Britten, they knew of the death of John Macy, a prominent Fond du Lac businessman who drowned when the *Niagara* burned off Port Washington in 1856, a day before the news reached Fond du Lac.



what to believe on that most momentous of all subjects, the life after death.<sup>14</sup>

This dual hope—that the spirits might provide certainty about the existence of God and of a life after death—is a constant theme in the writings of Wisconsin Spiritualists in the nineteenth century. It became especially prevalent during the Civil War era, when premature deaths touched the lives of thousands, and the problems of coping with being widowed or orphaned or rendered childless attracted many to Spiritualism. At the very beginning of the decade, John Dean of Portage City wrote about his experiences—experiences that were to become familiar throughout the state during the rest of the 1860's. He answered an inquiry put to him by his father-in-law, James Corydon Howard of Milwaukee. Dean had attended several seances in the fall of 1860, and he claimed that he was "*as ignorant as any novice can well be; and yet I now, as ever since last fall, feel so much interest in the subject, that I still wish to enquire if there is anything in sound reason and philosophy upon which to found such a system.*" Dean mentions that he did not believe that a manifestation he saw at a neighbor's was genuine because the room in which it occurred was dark. But he strikes the familiar note that religion is useless because one cannot know for certain if its truths are real: "The human mind, (or spirit) supposed to be a part of the Great Father of Spirits, is so constituted, or constructed, that it may be said to be *impossible to prove, or disprove anything of a spiritual or religious nature, except by faith alone.* We say *we believe*, or we do not believe, yet we *prove*, nor *disprove nothing*, merely because we have no *tangible evidence.*"<sup>15</sup> For John Dean the spirits represented at least the possibility of obtaining this tangible evidence.

R. T. Mason, a prominent Appleton Spiritualist, echoed the conviction that religion had failed to provide humanity with any certain answer about what becomes of the indi-

vidual after death. This failure of other religions led Mason to pursue Spiritualism. In 1869 Mason explained his views to Lyman Copeland Draper, secretary of the State Historical Society. Draper had become attracted to Spiritualism in 1868 because of the death of loved ones and because he hoped to unravel historical mysteries by communicating with deceased principals in notable events. Mason wrote Draper: "I began my investigation of this subject more than ten years ago mostly for the reason that the dogmatic teachings of the modern church were so notoriously in collision with the . . . doctrines of the individual sciences that I found myself adrift and gradually sinking into a hopeless *materialism*. I was glad to fall upon the foundations of a positive faith—a faith supported by reason—that faith I recognize in Spiritualism." In spite of his feelings about organized religion, Mason cautioned Draper not to be hasty about severing his ties with his church (in Draper's case the Baptist church in which he was a deacon). He stated that if he were Draper, "I should insist on my right to look into these things and not until I felt as though the Church was unduly restraining my liberty would I take myself out of an organization which I found heretofore so profitable."<sup>16</sup> Perhaps this kind of social awareness led to Mason's being supported for the presidency of the Wisconsin Spiritualists, for which he was favored because of his "good standing in the community."<sup>17</sup>

The poet Ella Wheeler Wilcox, who sought answers in Spiritualism, Theosophy, and New Thought, felt dismay as a child that her family expressed no great interest in the things of the spirit: "I heard the grown-ups talking in an agnostic manner about things spiritual. I recollect just how crude and limited their

<sup>14</sup> John Worth Edmonds and George Dexter, M.D., (eds.), *Spiritualism* (4th ed., New York, 1853), 1: 7-8.

<sup>15</sup> James Corydon Howard from John Dean, April 28, 1861, in the James Corydon Howard Papers, Box 3, Archives-Manuscripts Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>16</sup> R. T. Mason to Lyman C. Draper, January 17, 1869, in Box 17 of the Draper Correspondence, Archives-Manuscripts Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Draper did not take Mason's advice; he began to stay away from church services and "declined telling" the minister his reason. Finally Draper wrote a letter to the First Baptist Church explaining his views and withdrawing from the congregation. The Baptists waited two months, hoping that Draper would change his mind, before they expelled him.

<sup>17</sup> H. S. Brown, M.D., to Lyman C. Draper, May 22, May 26, August 2, 1869, in the Draper Correspondence.



minds seemed to me and in my heart was such a soft wonderful feeling of faith and KNOWLEDGE of worlds beyond this world." As she grew older the poet concluded that her family was not "atheistical," but rather "too advanced intellectually to accept the old eternal brimstone idea of hell and the eternal psalm-singing idea of heaven; it refused to accept the story of the recent formation of the earth, knowing science had proof of its vast antiquity; . . . so the Wheeler family was regarded as heretical by church people."<sup>18</sup> Ella Wheeler Wilcox considered her family typical of those whose progressive minds had outgrown the dictates of traditional religion and could not accept evidence of the existence of the spiritual world without scientific proof.

Even those who did not espouse Spiritualism or believe that spirit phenomena were genuine sympathized with the dilemma which the New Revelation was attempting to solve. As a young teacher in 1876 and 1877, Charles Van Hise boarded with a Spiritualist family at Union, Wisconsin, in Rock County. In a letter to a friend he recounted some of the Spiritualists' beliefs, particularly those that opposed organized religion, and went on to say, "It is hard to tell what to believe when one says, 'believe thus and so' or you will suffer everlasting tortures, another that you will live and be happy in the hereafter, and another that this world is the last of life. They are all sure that theirs is the true doctrine, and great men are among each. . . . I have been thinking of this for 2 or 3 years, and I am no nearer to a solution of the mystery than I was at first."<sup>19</sup>

THE great antipathy on the part of Spiritualists toward organized religion, combined with their desire to uphold certain religious beliefs—chiefly that the soul and personality of the individual survived the death of the body and could return to earth to communicate with the living—re-



Society's Iconographic Collection

Ella Wheeler Wilcox.

<sup>18</sup> Ella Wheeler Wilcox, *The Worlds and I* (New York, 1918), 66.

<sup>19</sup> "Letters of Charles Richard Van Hise," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 24: 191 (December, 1940).

sulted in a body of religious tenets that can accurately be called radical in contrast to contemporary prevailing beliefs. The Spiritualists claimed that the mainstream religions had gone astray for a variety of reasons: their insistence on a vengeful, punishing God; a corrupt, hypocritical clergy who terrorized their flocks into belief with threats of eternal damnation; blind acceptance of the Bible as the only source of divine revelation; hypocrisy and lack of Christian love on the part of church members for their fellow persons.

Warren Chase, founder of Ceresco, the Fourier community at Ripon, and a champion of radical causes all his life, was a particularly harsh critic of organized religion. Chase traveled extensively in Wisconsin, Illinois, and the eastern states during the 1850's and 1860's giving lectures on "Phrenology, Physiology, Geology, Temperance, Land Reform, and other subjects." He claimed that he did not accept pay until "the autumn of '52, when most other business was dispensed with, and the dispensation of our new gospel [Spiritualism] absorbed his time, and he entered the field as a lecturer, mainly on spirit life and intercourse, and the philosophy of that life and our intercourse with it."<sup>20</sup>

Like many others who experimented with spirit circles in the early 1850's, Chase and his friends in Fond du Lac and Ripon did not immediately succeed in establishing contact with the spirit world. In fact, it was six months before the members of Chase's circle were able to produce raps, and then only through the mediumship of a young Presbyterian woman.<sup>21</sup> Chase reported that at this meeting he felt raps all over his body dealt by the spirits of his two dead sons. According to Chase, he and his fellow Spiritualists



Society's Iconographic Collection

Warren Chase, Spiritualist and founder of the Fourierite community at Ceresco.

suffered a great deal of ridicule from the Christians of the area for persisting in attempts to contact spirits. But Chase spoke out just as strongly, making it clear that the Christians were the misguided ones: "Fools! what do you go weekly for years to the church for, and never find God, nor any sign that there is God, except those that the infidel has in common with you, in nature?"<sup>22</sup> Chase loathed the claim of supremacy by adherents of particular religions or philosophies, and he could not tolerate it even in those whose views were similar to his. He criticized even fellow Spiritualists: "It must be amusing to minds whose development has carried them far outside any of us, to watch each author of a

<sup>20</sup> Warren Chase, *The Life-Line of the Lone One or Autobiography of the World's Child* (Boston, 1857), 170. Chase refers to himself in the third person throughout the book, frequently as the Lone One. In addition to his interest in Spiritualism, Chase was a vegetarian, a teetotaler, and an advocate of women's rights. He was the Free Soil candidate for governor of Wisconsin in 1850 and served in the Wisconsin legislature and as a member of both Wisconsin constitutional conventions.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 174. The young lady was convinced by her family and her religious superiors that the spirit phenomena were produced by the Devil, and she abandoned her activities as a medium.

<sup>22</sup> *Idem.*



system of creation, as he gathers around him a little class of kindred minds, and teaches them that *his* is the great Divine law of creation by which God has unfolded power in a universe. . . ."<sup>23</sup> In connection with Chase's criticism of traditional Christianity, he was convinced that the institution of marriage greatly needed reform and that women suffered most from the institution.<sup>24</sup> Chase recounted the story of Mrs. P. of Milwaukee, "one of nature's noble women," who divorced her husband, to whom she had been unhappily married, after he deserted her and their three children. Mrs. P. remarried, but her second husband died within a few weeks. "Of course," wrote Chase, "it was not the duty of any Christian to aid or comfort her, for she had broken their sacred tie of legal marriage; and they not only let her suffer, but heaped slander on her with their scorn, . . . and thus she had all against her except the few Spiritualists who alone respected, appreciated, and sympathized with her. . . ." Because of his stand on marriage, Warren Chase, like many other Spiritualists, was accused of advocating free love; but he claimed about marriage that he "never did advocate its abolition, nor did he even believe it could be dispensed with; but he advocated those changes already alluded to [chiefly divorce], with a release of all the sufferers, without public scorn, as a consequence of freedom, as it now is, for women."<sup>25</sup>

Chase criticized further what he considered the idolatrous devotion to the Bible by organized Christian churches. He claimed that this blind acceptance of Biblical teachings kept the human mind bound by the chains of superstition, and that "there can be little progress in a human mind till this idol is given up to reason and criticism, and tried

for its truths by reason and science and history, and these will utterly ruin its claim to authenticity."<sup>26</sup>

An even more vehement critic of the Bible than Chase was Robert Schilling, an acquaintance of Chase who converted to Spiritualism in his later years. Like Chase, Schilling was interested in a variety of reforms. He published the *National Reformer*, a Greenback German-language paper in Milwaukee, and he also ran a nursing dairy. Schilling wrote a tract denouncing the Bible and the Spiritualists who believed in it. He quoted Leviticus: "A man or also a woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard, shall surely be put to death." And he exclaimed in amazement, "There are Spiritualists who want to pray to a being that issues such orders!" Schilling also made fun of another line from the Bible: "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Schilling insisted that "if God cannot establish his kingdom (whatever that may mean), or have his will done on earth after being asked to do so every day by his Christian followers for 1900 years, I am sorry for him. He certainly cannot claim to be omnipotent."<sup>27</sup> For both Schilling and Chase, the Bible symbolized the servitude of the established churches to corruption and superstition—a servitude fostered by the clergy.

In order to emphasize their distaste for organized religion, Spiritualists sometimes interrupted church services. On one occasion in 1851 the Sunday service at the Spring

<sup>23</sup> Warren Chase, *Forty Years on the Spiritual Roster* (Boston, 1888), 45.

<sup>24</sup> Warren Chase, "What and Where Are We?" in *Shekinah*, 3: 65-67 (1853).

<sup>25</sup> Almost from the beginning of their movement, Spiritualists were accused of loose living because of their stand on marriage and divorce. An excellent explanation of the Spiritualist idea of "free love" and marriage appears in a pamphlet by Lizzie Doten, a Spiritualist poet and trance speaker, who distinguishes between "free love" and "free lust." See "Free Love and Affinity: A Discourse Delivered Under Spirit Influence at the Melodean" (Boston, 1867).

<sup>26</sup> Chase, *Life-Line of the Lone One*, 192, 194.

<sup>27</sup> "Spiritualism and the Bible," in the Schilling Papers, Archives-Manuscripts Division, State Historical Society of Wisconsin. Although most Spiritualists opposed institutional religion, they were not all anti-Christian or anti-Bible. Charles Beecher, for example, son of Henry Ward Beecher, was convinced that one could in good conscience be a Christian Spiritualist. See *Spiritual Manifestations* (Boston, 1879). John Shoebridge Williams, an Ohio Spiritualist (the State Historical Society of Wisconsin has box after box of his writings), claimed that the "exact sciences" were to direct man in relation to the needs of the body and that the Bible was "to give him equal certainty in relation to his mental developments, involving his eternal progress and everlasting happiness. . . ." See *Spiritual Manifestations: Creations, Subversions, Redemptions and Harmonies* (Boston, 1854), 1: 1.



Street Congregational Church in Milwaukee was disrupted by a woman who walked to the pulpit while the minister was leading the final hymn. The pastor, J. G. Wilson, asked the woman to leave, and she walked away "with her lips mumbling some unknown tongue." The story appeared in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*, and the reporter added to it a rumor that the woman intended to pay similar visits to all the churches in Milwaukee. The woman's husband, J. D. Spaulding, denied this, however, claiming in a letter to the editor that his wife had been under spirit influence when she visited the Spring Street church and that she had no further plans for disrupting services.<sup>28</sup>

Debates between Spiritualists and clergy frequently occurred in the battle between the new and old revelations. Reports of them appeared fairly often in *The Spiritualist*, the newspaper published in Appleton and Janesville during 1868. Joseph Baker, editor of *The Spiritualist*, criticized George M. Steele, president of Lawrence College, for refusing to take part in just such a debate. Steele apparently had criticized Spiritualism in a baccalaureate sermon, claiming that all the good in the world had been accomplished by religion and that Spiritualism had yet to demonstrate its effectiveness. Baker countered with a criticism of his own: "You admit the importance of this subject or you wouldn't have mentioned us. Having thus attacked you cannot now resort to the usual dodge of silence without virtually admitting that you dare not or cannot meet the Spiritualists in a fair discussion." *The Spiritualist* engaged in ongoing criticism of Lawrence College, denying that the institution had any right to call itself "liberal." In a related incident *The Spiritualist* offered to print the commencement address of a young man who was prevented from graduating because he refused to alter the address, called by Baker "an oration of high order," according to the wishes of the college president.<sup>29</sup>

NOT surprisingly, the established clergy in Wisconsin, for the

most part, opposed Spiritualism and accused the new sect of fostering fraud and mental instability. The clergy was inclined, if it gave the spirit phenomena any credence at all, to attribute them to the workings of the Devil. In 1899 the Reverend A. H. Barrington of Janesville put forth his views on Spiritualism, and also on Christian Science and Theosophy, in a book called *Anti-Christian Cults*. The book had an introduction by Isaac Lea Nicholson, who was then Episcopal bishop of Milwaukee. Nicholson called the book an attempt to prevent the widespread delusion of the public "by the many talkers, the magicians of every degree—great and small—male and female—who . . . do most egregiously fool the people, lead many weak and unstable Christian folk away from the old faith, aside from the rough and narrow path." Barrington called Spiritualism "nothing but useless and profitless imposition, deceit, and trickery, accompanied by most mercenary motives." He chastised Spiritualists for trying to look into the unknown and admonished his readers to "walk by faith through life." Barrington was convinced that Spiritualism, like the other trappings of the occult—oracles, amulets, charms, potions, relics, etc.—was part of the Devil's plan to bring humanity under his power: "If there can be anything supernormal in Spiritualism . . . it is due *not* to communication with the spirits of our blessed dead, but to evil spirits, to demons who are evidently lying in wait to deceive."<sup>30</sup>

Not all clergy, however, totally opposed Spiritualism. The Reverend John James Elmendorf, a professor of theology at Racine College, sympathized with the Spiritualists' request that science investigate spirit phenomena to learn what laws govern their existence. In an article in the *Transactions* of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters, Elmendorf proceeded very cautiously, insisting that he was not introducing theological discussions into the concerns of the Academy. But he stated that science should not ignore the investigation of obviously sensible phenomena just because they seemed contrary to existing laws. He added that "the

<sup>28</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, January 31, February 6, 1851.

<sup>29</sup> *The Spiritualist*, November 9, June 11, 1868.

<sup>30</sup> A. H. Barrington, *Anti-Christian Cults* (Milwaukee, 1899), 3-4, 20-58.



facts related in connection with what is called 'spiritualism,' if they were duly attested," might furnish "a very striking example" of a law of nature which has not yet been investigated or discovered. Like the Spiritualists, Elmendorf speculated about the connection between "force" and "spirit," and, in contrast to the unbending attitude of most of his clerical colleagues, claimed that as regards the existence of spirit beings, "I have the right to employ it as a hypothesis."<sup>31</sup>

Despite the continuing battle between Spiritualism and the churches, Spiritualists nevertheless were able to perceive progress in the development of religion. Warren Chase commented that Protestants overcame the "superstition, folly and idolatry" of Catholicism; Methodists threw out the "pompous ceremonies" of the Church of England; and Universalists preached the foolishness of teaching love of a God who damned his children. Chase believed that the next step in the evolution of religion would be to de-supernaturalize it completely, to make religion a non-institution, free of dogma, clergy, and hierarchy. The spirit phenomena would make this possible through their revelation of parallel sets of natural laws which governed both the material and the spiritual worlds. If natural law were universal, governing both heaven and earth, then there could be no talk of "miracles" or of supernatural occurrences that remained forever unexplainable to lay persons—and left them at the mercy of a clergy that arrogated to itself the power to understand or to interpret such things. The communitarian reformer Robert Dale Owen, who, like others, turned to Spiritualism in his later years, was convinced that the world eventually would reject the supernatural in favor of the natural, the explainable, the scientific. Owen wrote in 1872 that he expected to see a "change from belief in the exceptional and the miraculous to a settled conviction that it does not enter into God's economy, as manifested in His works, to operate here except mediately, through the instrumentality of natural laws; or to suspend or change these laws on special occasions; or, as men do, to

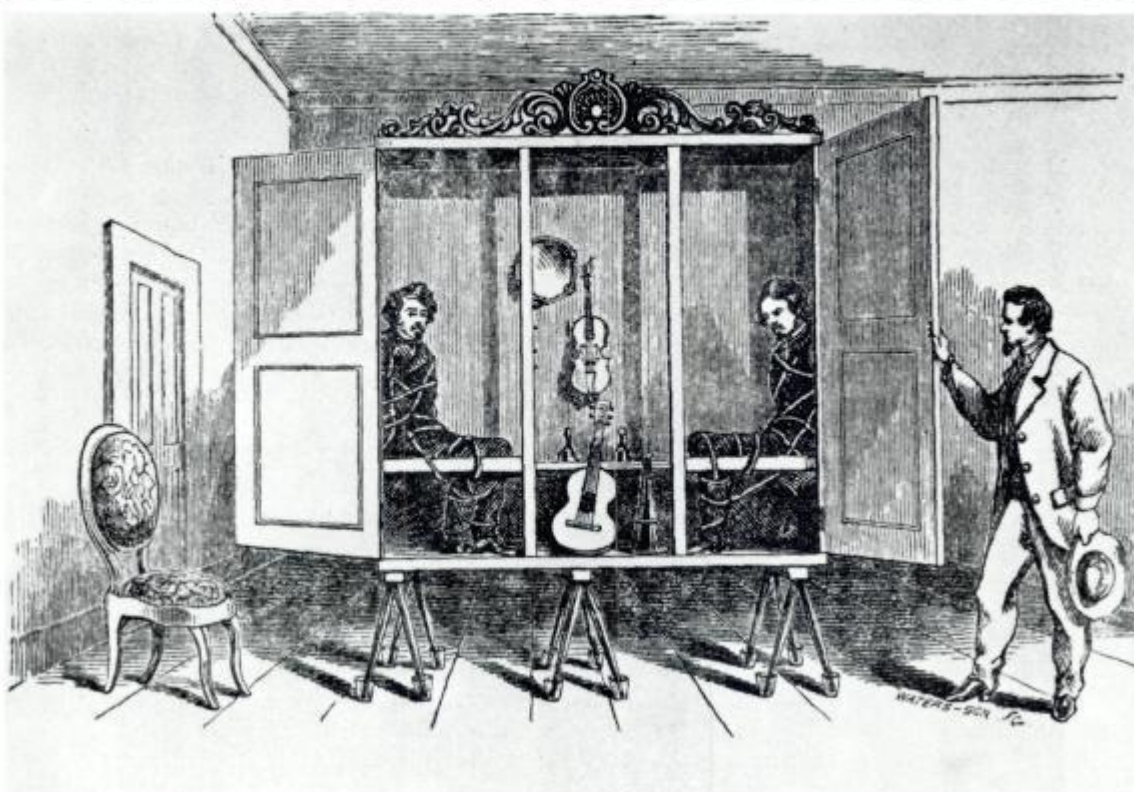
make temporary laws for a certain age of the world and discontinue these throughout succeeding generations."<sup>32</sup>

It is ironic that, although Spiritualism is typically classified as an occult religion, the Spiritualists themselves vehemently denied that this was true. Theirs was a scientific religion, totally dissociated from the mysterious or the hidden. But if Spiritualists denied an association with what people generally believed to be the occult, nonetheless many Spiritualists engaged in occult activities: trance speaking, automatic writing, healing, various kinds of character analysis such as phrenology and psychometry, and predictions about the future. To the Spiritualist, of course, these were not occult, but rather scientific activities, based on natural laws and forces as yet unknown. But such activities, and the publicity which attended them, were no doubt responsible for the general public opinion of Spiritualism in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—that it was and is a cultish religion, if indeed a religion at all, perpetrated by the fraudulent and embraced by the gullible. And it was these more sensational activities which accounted for Spiritualism's obscurity as a religion.

One of the best known of the Spiritualist activities, the seance, played a two-edged role in Spiritualism. Seances provided the theological basis for Spiritualism, but with their dubious and sometimes admittedly fraudulent goings-on, seances produced much of the damaging publicity afforded Spiritualism. A good example of the more spectacular and theatrically oriented seance occurred during the 1861 visit to Milwaukee of the Davenport brothers, two nationally known mediums whose career was managed by their father. As customary, the senior Davenport invited reporters to a preview of his sons' performance. During this display, the brothers were "controlled" by the spirit of the pirate Henry Morgan and his accompanying band of twenty spirits. One of these spirits hovered over the

<sup>31</sup> John James Elmendorf, S.T.D., "Nature and the Supernatural," *Transactions of the Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters*, 5: 66-70 (1877).

<sup>32</sup> Robert Dale Owen, *The Debatable Land Between This World and the Next* (New York, 1872), 175. For an excellent discussion of Robert Dale Owen as a Spiritualist, see Richard William Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen: A Biography* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1940).



Brown, The Heyday of Spiritualism

*Milwaukee journalists expressed doubt that the Davenport Brothers were freed from their bonds and cabinet by spirits.*

spirit cabinet, a kind of box in which the boys were placed, tightly bound. The newspapermen were invited to inspect the box and to help tie up the brothers, which they did. After a suitable length of time had elapsed, the Davenports emerged from the cabinet, supposedly set loose by the spirits. Accompanying the performance were spirit-played renditions of "Yankee Doodle" and "Pop Goes the Weasel." One of the reporters commented that the performance was "amusing" and "inexplicable," but hardly proof of spiritual agency. Skeptically, he expressed his wish to apply a red-hot pincers to the "spirit" which materialized above the cabinet.<sup>33</sup>

While the reporters attending the Davenports' seances were less critical than usual about Spiritualist activities, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* still printed critiques which were

generally unfavorable. There followed an exchange of letters to the editor concerning the validity of the Davenports' performance. A Milwaukee bookkeeper, Albert Morton, who frequently defended Spiritualism under the pen name "Justice," responded to the criticism of the musical selection: "... I should prefer converting people to a rational belief in a future life even by the 'dulcet strains of "Yankee Doodle,"' than to force them into a belief in my doctrine by holding before them a threat of unutterable torment."<sup>34</sup>

**H**EALING after the fashion of Franz Anton Mesmer, the discoverer of animal magnetism, was another typical Spiritualist activity that invited criticism, or at least scorn. Among the more famous of the Spiritualist healers was Cora L.

<sup>33</sup> *Milwaukee Sentinel*, December 9, 1861.

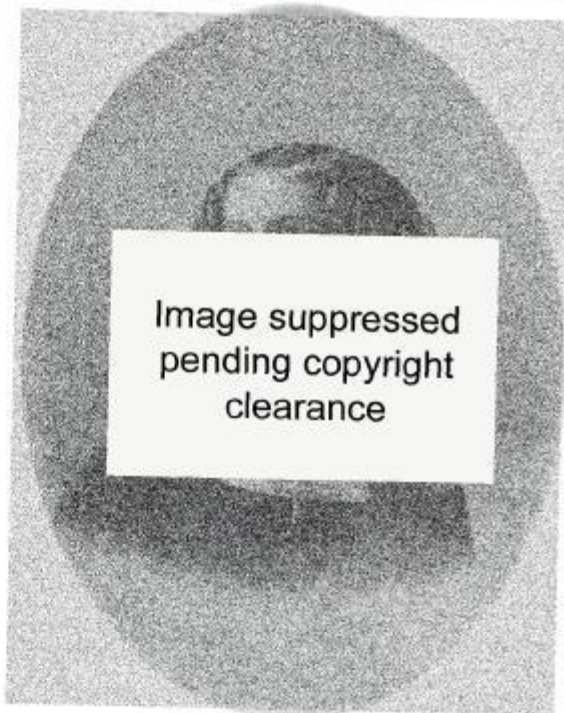
<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, January 18, 1862.



V. Scott (known at various times by the names of her three husbands: Hatch, Tappan, and Richmond). In 1851 Cora Scott began her healing career at the age of eleven. Her parents were acquainted with Spiritualism and had lived for a time in Adin Ballou's Hope-dale community in Massachusetts. In 1850 they moved to a farm near Lake Mills, in western Jefferson County, Wisconsin, an area that was soon to become notable for a variety of Spiritualist activities. Cora Scott's first spirit experience occurred when spirits completed a school composition for her by means of automatic writing. Soon after, Cora developed the ability to diagnose illnesses while in trance under the control of the spirit of a German doctor. Apparently she was successful, for (it was claimed) she "aroused the antagonism of the regular physicians and clergymen in the neighborhood. The former were without patients and the latter lacked audiences. . . . That village in Wisconsin soon became the center of a spiritual circle that had greater power than all the professionals taken together."<sup>35</sup> This assertion is difficult to prove or disprove, since primary documents about Cora Scott's career are rare and no newspapers published in or near Lake Mills during her childhood are known to have survived. Cora Scott remained a Spiritualist throughout her life, but she pursued her career, for the most part, in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco until her death in 1923.

Because she left Wisconsin as a child, it was not Cora Scott but rather her grammar school teacher, Mary Hayes Chynoweth, who assumed the leadership of Spiritualist activities in the Lake Mills-Whitewater-Madison area. Mary Hayes Chynoweth was Cora Scott's teacher at the time of Cora's first spirit visitation. Her first reaction to the news was disapproval; she was suspicious of Spiritualism and was afraid that Cora Scott had been possessed by a devil. She received her first visi-

<sup>35</sup> Harrison D. Barrett, *Life Work of Mrs. Cora L. V. Richmond* (Chicago, 1895), 8-9. For an informative discussion of Cora L. V. Scott's life as a medium, see R. Laurence Moore, "The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America," in the *American Quarterly*, 27: 200-221 (May, 1975). Moore mentions a man named Daniels as another of Cora Scott's husbands.



Britten, Modern American Spiritualism

*Cora L. V. Scott, whose long career in Spiritualism began during her childhood in Lake Mills.*

tation from the Holy Spirit, or the Power, as she called it, on a night when she had refused to go with some of her family to one of Cora Scott's "test-meetings." On this evening Mrs. Hayes Chynoweth was brought to her knees in the kitchen by an unknown force, and she began speaking in tongues. She was then lifted off her feet and inspired to open the Bible and point to certain passages. She claimed that she knew very little about the Bible: "The way everybody quoted Scripture, and then put different constructions to suit themselves, prejudiced me so that I discontinued reading it; dogmas always repelled me." Nevertheless Mrs. Hayes Chynoweth was inspired to point to the account of Pentecost and the list of the gifts given by the Holy Spirit to the Apostles. Her father asked, "Do you mean it was appointed that my daughter do all this?" The answer was yes.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Louisa Johnson Clay, *The Spirit Dominant: A Life of Mary Hayes Chynoweth* (San Jose, California, n.d.), 47-48. Louisa Johnson Clay wrote the biography in thanksgiving for the cure of her mother by Mary Hayes Chynoweth, a factor which no doubt influenced her viewpoint.

This first visitation resulted in a career that spanned the rest of Mary Hayes Chynoweth's life, from the early 1850's until her death in California in 1905. She preached and healed and held seances; and she used her spirit powers to give personal as well as financial advice to her relatives and followers. She seems to have been a Christian Spiritualist, though, as she said, dogma repelled her. Unlike most Spiritualists, she claimed that her power was derived from the Holy Spirit rather than from the spirits of the dead. But, on the other hand, her letters and writings reveal that she believed that spirits did communicate with the living. In a letter to Mr. and Mrs. Lyman Draper she claimed that she was never alone, "and it is lively comfort to know our spirit friends are with us—What a life of unhappiness and misery this must be to those who have no confidence in our spiritual philosophy."<sup>37</sup>

Whatever the exact nature of her theological beliefs, Mary Hayes Chynoweth followed her preaching mission throughout south-central Wisconsin, to "East and West Troy, Columbus, Muckwanago, Milton Junction, Whitewater, Jefferson, and other places," all of them convenient to Lake Mills and Waterloo, where her two sons were born in 1855 and 1857. By the time the two sons, Everis Anson and Jay O. Hayes, were completing law school at the University of Wisconsin, Mary Hayes Chynoweth was firmly established as a healer and a clairvoyant, and she was well known in the Madison area. There she engaged in seances with judges, doctors, lawyers, and university professors, among them Lyman Draper, William Penn Lyon of the Wisconsin State Supreme Court (whose daughter was married to Jay Hayes), and John Faval, a Harvard-educated physician whose family had come to Lake Mills from western New York.

By the time her sons had practiced law for several years, Mary Hayes Chynoweth was using her spiritual powers for financial benefit. Acting on the advice of the Power, she urged her sons, who by this time were practicing law in Ashland, to invest \$850 in a

tract of land in Bayfield County and not to sell until they could get \$5,000 for it. Next, the Power instructed the Hayes brothers to look for iron ore. They found it in abundance, and, along with their mother, became the owners and operators of the Hayes Mining Company, the Harmony Iron Company, and the Hayes-Chynoweth Company. The basis of the family success was the Germania Mine, one of the deepest on the Gogebic Range. The *Ashland Daily Press Annual* for 1891-1892 claimed that "it was very largely due to the unflinching faith and energy of Mrs. Hayes Chynoweth and her sons" that the lower levels of the mine were opened up. Whether this "unflinching faith" was based on instructions from the spirit Power, or whether the mining successes were due to the business acumen and good luck of the Hayes brothers, there is insufficient evidence to prove.<sup>38</sup>

By 1887 Mary Hayes Chynoweth and her sons had taken up residence in California, where they had lived for several years in the early 1870's. They built an estate at Eden Vale near San Jose, where Mrs. Hayes Chynoweth founded the True Life Church, of which her son Everis Anson was a lay minister until his death in 1942. The church seems to have been Spiritualist in nature with emphasis on healing; but, according to Clara Lyon Hayes, her mother-in-law "had invented no new doctrine or theory of religion, she had simply lived and expounded the principles of truth that have been from everlasting."<sup>39</sup> Mary Hayes Chynoweth continued to be the spiritual leader of many of her Madison followers until her death in 1905. Both Judge Lyon and Lyman C. Draper spent time at Eden Vale seeking the healing powers as well as the spiritual advice of Mary Hayes Chynoweth.

**D**RAPER maintained a close connection with Mary Hayes Chynoweth and her family, whom he had met

<sup>37</sup> Mary Hayes (Chynoweth) to Mr. and Mrs. Lyman Draper, January 13, 1883, in the Draper Correspondence.

<sup>38</sup> "Ashland and Its Iron Mines," in *The Ashland Daily Press Annual* (1891-1892), 60-61.

<sup>39</sup> Clara Lyon Hayes, "William Penn Lyon: Activities in Retirement," in the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, 9: 411 (1925-1926).



through mutual friends, from the late 1860's until his death in 1891. This association included a common interest in Spiritualism and various financial dealings as well.<sup>40</sup> But it was not through Mary Hayes Chynoweth that Draper experienced his initial contact with the spirits, for he first encountered a medium during a research trip in Kentucky. While interviewing Sylvester P. Morgan, a farmer with pioneer ancestors, Draper became acquainted with Morgan's daughter, Mrs. Josephine Keigwin. Draper attended seances at the Keigwin home near Jeffersonville, as well as in Louisville. He communicated with the spirit of his dead daughter Helen, who assured him that she often visited Draper and his wife in spirit form. As happy as he was to have contact with his dead loved ones, Draper was also very excited at the prospect of speaking with the spirits of dead pioneers and Indian fighters.<sup>41</sup>

After Mary Hayes Chynoweth moved to California, Draper consulted the spirits about his personal life through the agency of clairvoyants. One of these was Mrs. Julia Severance of Whitewater and Milwaukee, who was famous throughout the state as a Spiritualist and social reformer.<sup>42</sup> Draper sent Mrs. Severance a lock of his hair and asked her to analyze his personality through psychometric evaluation (whereby the clairvoyant assesses a person by physical contact with an object belonging to that person). Mrs. Severance advised him by letter on everything from his diet to his social life. She suggested unleavened graham bread, baked potatoes, and hot baths; she mentioned that Draper might do well to associate with younger members of the opposite sex, "in a commonplace social way, so that you can receive from them the

<sup>40</sup>The Draper Correspondence with the Hayes family indicates that Lyman Draper helped Anson Everis Hayes, the first husband of Mary Hayes Chynoweth, to sell apples. He also invested money in the Germania Mine and, on occasion, borrowed money from the Hayes brothers.

<sup>41</sup>William B. Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission: The Story of Lyman C. Draper* (Madison, 1954), 229, 230.

<sup>42</sup>Mrs. Severance's interest in social reform earned her a reputation as a radical. The *Milwaukee Sentinel* described her as taking "the extreme radical ground" in her attempts at reform, "going if possible beyond the notions of Victoria C. Woodhull," January 13, 1874.



Society's Iconographic Collection.

*Mary Hayes Chynoweth, spiritual adviser to Lyman C. Draper and other notable figures in the Madison community.*

more youthful magnetic element." Mrs. Severance informed Draper that he was attended by "a very advanced class of spirits," and that if he followed her directions he would "be able to perfect yourself in this life so that when you arrive in Spirit life you will be in condition to move right along harmoniously with your work in 'the hereafter.'"<sup>43</sup>

Draper died a Spiritualist in August, 1891. Seven years before his death, he had learned in a vision that he would die on August 27, but he did not know what year until the onset of his last illness. His death occurred late in the evening of August 26, 1891, a few hours short of the date he had predicted.<sup>44</sup>

Morris Pratt of Whitewater was another beneficiary of the financial talents of Mary

<sup>43</sup>Mrs. A. B. Severance to Lyman C. Draper, September 25, 1888, in "Scrap-Book of Material on the Life, Career and Death of Lyman C. Draper," in the State Historical Society of Wisconsin.

<sup>44</sup>Hesseltine, *Pioneer's Mission*, 316.

Hayes Chynoweth's spirit Power. Mrs. Chynoweth overheard a pledge made by Pratt that if he became wealthy he would devote most of his money to Spiritualism. She advised Pratt to invest his money in "wild lands" in northern Wisconsin and Michigan. He did so, and became rich from the discovery of iron ore. Pratt used his money to build a Spiritualist college in Whitewater, the Morris Pratt Institute. Completed in 1888, the large building had classrooms, offices, reception rooms, and space sufficient to board fifty students. According to rumor, the third floor was the seance room and furnished completely in white. Only full-fledged members of the Spiritualist faith, dressed in white, were permitted to enter.<sup>45</sup>

The curriculum of the Morris Pratt Institute was ordinary in some respects, offering such subjects as grammar and rhetoric, English composition, and history. But many of the courses were typically Spiritualist, reflecting the Spiritualist belief that the perfect religion would have to be scientific in outlook. The course offerings consisted of "psychic research (a study of the relation which exists between this world and that beyond the grave); comparative religion (a study of the great religions of the world—both of the so-called miracles and manifestations of science with theology—a study of each branch of science, or the war which the Christian church waged against it through the centuries); higher criticism, which is the study of the Bible

from the standpoint of science; evolution; spiritualism of the Bible, explaining the so-called miracles and manifestations of supernatural power in the Bible on natural grounds."<sup>46</sup> The Institute continued its operations well into the twentieth century and eventually moved to Milwaukee.

In Wisconsin Spiritualism three prominent groups emerge: that which revolved around Mary Hayes Chynoweth in the Lake Mills-Whitewater-Madison area, that which encompassed much of the Fox River valley, including Ripon, Omro, Appleton, Oshkosh, and Fond du Lac, among whose prominent members were Warren Chase, Nathaniel P. Tallmadge, and R. T. Mason; and that which was centered in Milwaukee and was led by Mrs. Julia Severance and Dr. H. S. Brown. The members of all three groups, many of whom were acquainted with each other, had in common a liberal spirit in regard to politics, religion, and social relationships, and a conviction that Spiritualism, as a radical belief untainted by the fears and superstitions fostered by traditional religions, could provide humanity with certain knowledge not only of the natural laws of this world, but of the next as well. Many of these Spiritualists, including Warren Chase, Nathaniel Tallmadge, Cora Scott, Lyman Draper, William Penn Lyon, Mary Hayes Chynoweth, and John Favil, had in common also a birthplace in western New York, the "burnt-over district," where Spiritualism had begun. It is interesting to speculate whether a youth spent in the "burnt-over district" might not be conducive to the espousal of radical religious beliefs later in life.

Underneath the more sensational aspects of Spiritualism, such as the seances, the trance speaking, the financial predictions, and the automatic writing—those aspects of Spiritualism which received the most publicity—lay the basic belief that spirit manifestations were intended to reassure humanity that each person would survive the death of the body, that the individual personality would endure

<sup>45</sup>Fred L. Holmes, "Prospecting with the Spirits," in *Badger Saints and Sinners* (Milwaukee, 1939), 365–378. Although Holmes is in many cases a teller of fables, his account of the Morris Pratt Institute seems to coincide with other information available, particularly in Whitewater newspapers. Pratt's belief in Spiritualism does not seem to have affected his social standing in the community as is indicated by a sketch that appeared in the *Portrait and Biographical Record of Walworth and Jefferson Counties, Wisconsin* (Chicago, 1894), 464–465, although it does sound rather as though the author of the sketch felt a need to justify Pratt's belief: "Mr. and Mrs. Pratt are Spiritualists in religious belief, and are kind, charitable and benevolent people, devoted to the best interests of humanity. The honesty of purpose and strict integrity of Mr. Pratt are above question, and a well-spent life has won for him the confidence and respect of all." The *Portrait and Biographical Record* refers to the Morris Pratt Institute as a "sanitarium and science hall."

<sup>46</sup>"Morris Pratt Institute," in *Walworth County Trade Review: A Business Trade Review of Towns and Villages in Walworth County, Wisconsin* (March, 1917). Excerpt available in Whitewater Public Library.



in the spirit world and would dwell with loved ones in a Swedenborgian heaven where life went on in a familiar manner, much as it did on earth.

It is tempting to ridicule some of the more bizarre aspects of Spiritualism, and it would be foolish to deny that Spiritualism attracted more than its share of cranks, hoaxers, and gulls, who sought money or entertainment or notoriety from contact with the spirits. But it is difficult not to sympathize with the Spiritualists' longing for certainty about that most vital of questions: does humankind survive the death of the body?<sup>47</sup> In an age when scientific discoveries, modernism, and materialism threatened old religious beliefs and values, the Spiritualists believed that they had found a scientific religion, one based on the physical phenomena supplied by the spirits. Only a century's hindsight enables us to adjudge the Spiritualists as overly optimistic in their belief that science and scientific method could make known to humanity the mysteries of life and death.

**S**PIRITUALISM stood in the context of nineteenth-century attempts to reconcile science and religion, to urge that science, rather than bringing about the obsolescence of religion, might instead free it from the strictures of dogma and authoritarianism. The result of this reconciliation would be a spiritual science, a body of doctrine that would disclose the existence of "realms interpenetrating our visible and coarser world" without necessitating a rejection of reason and logic.

The principal concern of Spiritualism was to prove the existence of life after death and the survival of the human personality. Later attempts at reconciling science and religion, such as Christian Science, Theosophy, Anthroposophy, and New Thought, were broader in their outlooks and emphasized the proving of such concepts as the existence of soul, reincarnation, and a divine plan for the universe.

<sup>47</sup> A particularly poignant expression of this longing appears in a poem, "You Promised Me," written by Ella Wheeler Wilcox to the spirit of her dead husband, *The Worlds and I*, 346-347.

These latter movements unanimously condemned Spiritualism as essentially materialistic for bringing the spirits of the dead to the earthly plane rather than elevating the human soul to a higher spiritual consciousness.

Perhaps, in the end, it was the Spiritualists' insistence on the spirits of the dead as the agents of the New Revelation that resulted in the decline of the movement. By the end of the nineteenth century, its popularity had diminished, and although the movement experienced another upsurge during and immediately after World War I, as it had during the Civil War, Spiritualism never again achieved the prestige or the widespread appeal that characterized it during the second half of the nineteenth century. For it was the paradox of Spiritualism that it, too, was founded on faith, a faith in the genuine nature of the spirit phenomena. And for more and more people this faith became difficult to sustain. After forty years of psychic research and a definite will to believe in their genuine nature, the novelist Hamlin Garland, himself a Wisconsin-born son of the Middle Border, was still unable to accept the manifestations he had witnessed as real:

When in the quiet of my study I converse with invisibles who claim to be my disincarnate friends and relatives, occupying some other dimension, I am almost persuaded of their reality. For the moment I concede the possibility of their persistence, especially when their voices carry, movingly, characteristic tones and their messages are startlingly intimate. . . . But after they have ceased to whisper and I recall the illimitable vistas of the stars, these phantasms of my dead, like all other human beings, barbaric or civilized, are as grains of dust in a cosmic whirlwind.

Nor could Garland ever persuade himself that humanity might succeed in exploring that "undiscovered country," the life beyond the grave: "We know a little now, we shall know a little more a century hence—but death will still be the ultimate insoluble mystery."<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Hamlin Garland, *Forty Years of Psychic Research: A Plain Narrative of Fact* (New York, 1936), 391-392, 394.