

"THE OLD BOHEMIAN HALL" A Watercolor by Gerhard C.F. Miller by Jill Dopke

While Visiting the Kewaunee <u>Public Library</u> — Located behind the main desk and prominently displayed on the wall was an ordinary painting that I had seen often. Then, one day I looked up, and seemed to really see it for the first time. I studied it closely. I asked the librarian, Linda Vogel, about it. She said it was the old Bohemian Hall that had been located in downtown Kewaunee many, many

years ago; she added that Helen Kuehl, a former library board trustee, had acquired the painting for the library. We removed the painting from the wall to look for any further information on the back and found the title, "The Old Bohemian Hall," and the artist's name, Gerhard C.F. Miller. Clearly this was an original, not a print.

<u>The Artist</u> — Gerhard C.F. Miller (1903-2003) was born, raised, and lived in Door County his entire life. He taught himself to paint at the age of 11 when he was stricken with polio; he continued to paint until his

death at the age of 100 in 2003. In the art world, Gerhard's style of painting was called "imaginary realism" – some imagination and some realism. His medium was watercolor, and he taught himself the ancient technique of egg tempera which uses the egg yolk to bind the pigments. Paintings of this type resemble pastels and, unlike oil paintings, do not darken, yellow, or become transparent with age.

<u>The Painting</u> — The colors in the painting are soft and warm, and enhance the dignity of the hall conveying all the richness of a palace and, although the architecture is simple, the elaborate scrollwork in the windows suggests an "old world" charm. Shades of light to dark penetrate each windowpane, adding depth and mystery to the interior; surrounding and framing the hall is a worn plank boardwalk, If you wish to receive some whispering elm trees, and a lazy blue sky.

If you wish to receive notification that the most recent issue of the KCHS newsletter is available online, send your request to gabitz@centurytel.net with your name and email address. HISTORICAL NOTES

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"The Old Bohemian Hall" — A watercolor painting by Gerhard C.F. Miller, presently hanging in the Kewaunee Library. *Photo of painting by Jerry Abitz.*



contract was given to Theo. Weck, and constructed by Frantisek Kubes. The hall was 60 x 30 feet, and the ceiling in the main room was 20 feet above the floor. The

Kewaunee in 1870 for the Slovanska Lipa, a Czech cul-

tural organization for social gatherings. The carpenter

The Hall — The Bohemian Hall was built in

Gerhard C. F. Miller. Image courtesy of www.sturgeonbayguide.com.

Czechs met in the hall for meetings, plays, lectures, and dances. In 1873, Joseph Mashek built a basement under the stage, and, a year later, the hall was expanded with a 26-foot addition. In 1878 the Czech-American Sokol purchased the hall; they were a patriotic organization founded in Prague in 1862 for the purpose of providing physical, moral, and intellectual training, and dances, plays, and social events continued to be held at the hall.

A 1892 newspaper account indicates Joseph Swoboda, a local woodcarver, added a semi-circular sign above the entrance with gilded lettering and a finely carved eagle on top designating it as a Czech-American Sokol. The eagle was most likely a falcon—the symbol for the Czech Sokol movement. "Sokol" is also the Czech word for falcon, and the falcon is proudly portrayed on their flag.

A unique and beautiful structure, the Bohemian Hall graced the southwest corner of Milwaukee and Harrison Streets for 44 years. Then, in 1914, the Sokol decided to build a new brick hall on the site. Following the last dance on Aug. 18, 1914, the hall was sold for \$300 to Herman Molle who moved it a short distance west on Harrison Street to the site of his blacksmith shop where he used it to house his wagon-building business. It seems the carved lettering and falcon were removed at this time, but where they are today or whether they still exist is unknown.



In 1914, the Bohemiam Hall was sold to Herman Molle who moved it to the site of his blacksmith shop where he used it to house his wagon-making business. *Image courtesy of the KCHS photo collection*.

Back to the Library — I returned to the library a few weeks later after a visit with Gerhard's daughter, Margaret Utzinger. She shared that if a painting was sold, her father "religiously" wrote the price of his paintings on the back; since no price could be found on the back of this painting, she concluded that he had donated the painting; additionally, she thought it was probably painted in the 1970s.

My last question to librarians Susan Grossheusch and Linda Vogel now was, "Who commissioned Gerhard to paint the old Bohemian Hall?"

We focused our search on the 1970s. Realizing that the new library was built in 1976 and Helen Kuehl was on the library board at that time, we quickly narrowed our efforts to the minutes from the board meetings for that year. Sure enough; there was our answer in the minutes of May 26, 1976. It read:

"Helen Kuehl reported to the group that she had secured the Gerhard Miller picture which had been painted for the library at the request of Olga Dana and which was feared lost to the library through misunderstanding after her death [1974] and that of her son Byron [1975]. The recovery



Olga Dana. *Photo courtesy of the KCHS photo collection*.

of the gift came as a result of a visit Helen made to the artist and his wife when she was able to remind them of incidents proving that the library was to be the recipient."

<u>In Conclusion</u> — Today nothing remains of this historic hall in Kewaunee, but it continues to live on for all to see because of Olga Dana's request, Helen Kuehl's appeal, and Gerhard C. F. Miller's gracious donation of "The Old Bohemian Hall."

Author's notes — To read more about Gerhard C.F. Miller's life, explore *Gerhard C.F. Miller: His Life, His Poetry, His Philosophy, and His Painting* by Ruth Morton Miller, MAC Publ. Co., 1987.

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— To see some of Gerhard C.F. Miller's other watercolors, visit the Miller Art Museum located in the Sturgeon Bay Library.

Special Thanks — I want to thank Margaret Utzinger for sharing information about her father's paintings; and Librarians Linda Vogel and Susan Grossheusch for helping me uncover the history behind the painting. *Aren't librarians wonderful?*!

HISTORICAL NOTES

RAY SELNER, THE VOICE OF THE CZECH IMMIGRANTS

by Jerry Abitz

While visiting a neighborhood pub in Czechoslovakia, now known as the Czech Republic, Ray was asked, "What year did you leave our country to live in America?" Imagine the surprise of the bartender when Ray responded in fluent Czech, "I was born in America." "But you talk just like us," the bartender replied.

Ray Selner is a most unusual fellow. Born in the Town of Franklin in southwestern Kewaunee County, he

attended the one-room Whittier School where he skipped a grade and graduated after seven years; he then attended Denmark High School and graduated in 1943 at the age of 16.

Too young at the time he finished school, he was eventually drafted into the army in 1945 near the end of the World War II. His service time was spent entirely in the States as he was one of a few chosen to serve as a cadre of instructors to teach the raw recruits in basic training. The army was aware of his linguistic abilities, but ignored them. In 1946 he was discharged and returned home. As a veteran, he had the GI Bill; choosing On-the-Farm Training, he worked with several instructors including John Christofferson, a fellow classmate of mine from the UW-Madison School of Agriculture.

Marriage followed in 1949 to Marian Blaha of Two Creeks at Blessed Virgin Church in Tisch Mills; their family grew to include two sons and three daughters, all of whom live in the area. Together Ray and Marian took over the operation of the 1869 family farm established by his immigrant Czech grandfather. Today Ray is a widower, having lost his wife five years ago. He still lives on the home farm, now operated by his youngest son.

Ray has long participated in local politics, serving 12 years as clerk of the Franklin Town Board and four years as its chairman; he also served 12 years on both the Denmark School Board and his parish council. When asked how he became so committed to



Added in 1989, the St. Lawrence Church of Stangelville was the first church in Wisconsin to be listed on the National Register of Historic Places. *Photo courtesy of the Kewaunee County News*.

community service, he replied, "It was in my blood. I took after my grandfather who served on the town board." I remarked that it was a somewhat unusual choice for someone whose occupation involved a work-day starting at sunrise and ending at dusk. His response was, "The family helped out to accommodate my civic obligations. I remember leaving for a convention in Milwaukee at 5:00 a.m. after we had finished the milking and getting back home at 3:00 a.m. the next morning. "Where there is a will, there is a way.""

I first met Ray in Madison in 1989 when he appeared before the Historic Preservation Review Board with a nomination for his church. This 15member board, of which I was one, determined which properties or sites were eligible for the National Register of Historic Places. Here was a private citizen, not some hired professional, who had spent two years researching and writing this detailed nomination. The board was amazed and impressed with his presentation, and told him so. As a result of his efforts, the St. Lawrence Church of Stangelville was the first church accepted from Wisconsin to be placed on the National Register.

He got involved in this undertaking while he was writing the history of his church for their 125th anniversary, and it just seemed natural to follow through with this nomination. He admitted that he got some help from a staff member, Jim Draeger, who

RAY SELNER

(Continued from page 3)

made a special visit to view the church after attending to business in Sturgeon Bay for the Wisconsin Historical Society. Today Ray serves as a tour guide for Czech tours to the area sponsored by Agricultural Heritage and Resources based in Kewaunee. For those of you who have never seen the interior of St. Lawrence, it is worth a trip to see it in all its Old World glory.



I next met Ray when he was being sued by a neighbor who claimed his farm operation kept them from getting their historic building on the National Register. Although Ray won his case, it cost him a bundle in attorney fees and several years of anxiety to do so.

Ray Selner. Photo supplied by Ray Selner.

Several years ago, he wrote a book, A Brief History of Stangelville. which sold

many copies. At 83, he is busy working away at still another project-translating historical documents written in Czech about the early history of the Czech community, which emphasize Father Cipren who founded many area Catholic churches. Father Suess of St. Mary's in Luxemburg has given him some help, especially in translating church documents. His goal is to have this published. The Green Bay Catholic Diocese seemed enthusiastic about the project but gave him only moral support. At one point, he contacted Czech Archives in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, for copies of specific published documents; due to a flood, it was difficult to retrieve what he wanted. He located the same documents at the University of Minnesota Archives and requested a date to review and copy them, only to be snubbed by the professor responsible for them. But his persistence paid off when workers found the documents and copied them.

I could not help being impressed with his knowledge of the Czech immigration to Wisconsin. seemingly centered in Kewaunee and Manitowoc Counties. As good farmland became scarce, immigrants leapfrogged to localities elsewhere in Wisconsin. With the enactment of the Homestead Act which granted free land to settlers who met certain requirements, many of them settled in Southeastern Nebraska.

Ray and Marian have done their genealogy with some lines going back to the 1500s. When asked why he was doing all this work when most have retired to a life of leisure, his answer was, "I am proud of my Czech heritage, and want to share it. I want no profit for what I am doing. For me, it is a labor of love."

He is one proud man with a tremendous sense of drive; his community can be grateful for his accomplishments. We, as collectors of Kewaunee County history, hope to be able help him in his endeavor.

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WALKING TO SCHOOL WITH LOUIS

by Bruce Vandervest

I knew there had to have been a path through the woods; at least, at one time there was. That was the shortcut that Louis [Fr., pron. "loo·ee"] Fichta (1903-1998) took to school as a boy-from Hwy. BB in Southern Kewaunee County to Collegiate School on Collegiate Road.

In 1979 Louis sold his farm to Ricky and Karlene Koenig. He then lived with them for a short time; during that time, he shared the story of his life. A gentle, quiet, unassuming man, Louis was also a bachelor

One of the stories he shared was of his walks to school. He would often stop to play with his Indian friends who, at that time, were still living in the woods. (The Pottawatomie did not receive their reservation in Forest County until about 1913; long after that the Indians would come back here and camp on their friend Louis' land.)



Louis Fichta (circa 1980s). Photo courtesy of Karlene and Ricky Koenig.

One day as Louis was walking home from school he stopped to talk with his Indian pals who were on their way to take a bath in the river (Martin Creek/Tisch Mills Creek) which ran through the woods. They talked Louis into coming along, but Louis didn't go into the water. Once, earlier in his

(Continued on page 5)



Built in 1906, the second Collegiate School (as it looked in 2007) operated until 1964. Over the years the abandoned school began to crumble and the roof started to sag in the middle; by 2008 it was torn down. *Photo by Bruce Vandervest.*

LOUIS FICHTA

(Continued from page 4)

young life, after a long day of threshing, some of the men threw Louis into the creek. After that, Louis never liked taking baths nor swimming in the creek.

I wanted to see if Louis' path through the woods was still there. I was camping on Tommy and Bonnie Prucha's land near the Indian burial site on their property. The farm that was once Louis' was less than 40 acres away through the woods. I walked into the hardwoods going east into a swampy area of the forest and, just past that, there it was—a path, actually an ATV trail. It must have been a logging trail when Louis was young. I had heard the neighborhood kids in the woods on their ATVs, but I had no idea their trails were so extensive; there is also a snowmobile trail back there.

When I hit the trail, I turned to the right and walked, which took me to Louis' old farm. So I knew if I went back the way I came and kept walking, I would be walking to school like Louis did. And, I did.

It was a strange feeling walking through the woods and cedar swamp knowing that Louis had walked this trail so many decades ago. It was a good half-hour walk and over a mile to get to where the school had been. Over the years, the abandoned school crumbled and started to fall down; it is now gone, as are Louis and the Pottawatomie.

Author's note — Thank you to Karlene and Ricky Koenig for sharing information about Louis Fichta.

DONATIONS TO KCHS

by Jill Dopke

The KCHS would like to thank the following people for their donations:

Thomas Zieloski and Mary (Zieloski) Rauch — 1880 and 1893 Bird's Eye Views of Kewaunee in memory of their parents, Ray and Lucille Zieloski. These large views will go on display in the Jail Museum as soon as they are reframed with archival backing and glass. Both show locations of residences, businesses, churches, school, courthouse, post office, hills, valleys, bridge, and docks.

Deb and Ethel Bothe — 1887 Kewaunee Harbor Diagram and 1888 U.S. Army Chief Engineer's Report which will go on display at the Museum after framing. The diagram shows water depths, the original mouth of the Kewaunee River, piers and docks, bridge, and businesses in the harbor area; the report describes the work on the harbor and lists the exports and imports.

Keith Umentum — Star brick from the Star Brick Co. that operated in Kewaunee (circa 1905-1909). If anyone has any information about the Star Brick Co., please contact Jill Dopke (920-388-2830).



Jack and Carol Doehler — Grade/Attendance Register for High Bluff School, District #3—Montpelier, and photo of students in front of Norman School in Carlton (circa 1920s). Only two students have been identified in this photo (see below) — Tony Blazei (front row, second from left), and Orville Jerovitz (front row, third from left). If you can identify others, please contact Jill Dopke (920-388-2830).



Norman School students (circa early 1920s). Photo courtesy of Jack and Carol Doehler.

Edwin Alberts' Legacy to Kewaunee County

Børre and Agnette Alberts, and their son, Edwin, were among the first Norwegian immigrants to Kewaunee County. They arrived in America in the summer of 1853, located on land in southeastern Carlton Town in 1854 and, according to an early Carlton map, purchased 80 acres from the government near the lakeshore in 1855.

Back in Norway, land was scarce. Because of the mountainous terrain and the many fjords, most people were able only to own or rent a few acres to farm. For generations too, families had divided their land to give to their children, and parcels had become so small they could no longer support a family. Here in America though, there were vast amounts of newly-surveyed lands for sale, and one could own many, many acres. Within a few years, the Alberts purchased more land to the east bordering Lake Michigan, and the family grew as seven more children were born.

The Alberts family worked the farm ever in view of Lake Michigan and the many schooners that sailed the lake. In those early days there were no roads, only Indian trails and, although some used the beach for travel, schooners were the major mode of transportation for goods and people. According to local historian, Orwin Burmeister, Edwin even sailed the Great Lakes for a while before turning to farming. This is where the story of Edwin's legacy to Kewaunee County begins when, in the late 1800s, he built a new barn about a stone's throw from the Lake Michigan shoreline.

"And now, the rest of the story..."

Scattered throughout Kewaunee County there are many old barns rich in history and unique to each family that built them. But the barn that Edwin built was very unique; it was a round barn. More specifically, it was an octagonal barn because it has eight flat sides.

Round and polygonal barns were popular from the late 1800s through the 1920s. Some say they were built because people believed evil spirits hid in corners, but most were built because they were cheaper, more efficient, provided more interior space, and could withstand high winds better than rectangular barns. They also took advantage of the shape of cows by placing them in a circle. Round barns were also more interesting. By the 1930s, though, farms were becoming more mechanized, and rectangular barns were becoming the standard. They took less time to build, were easier to store machinery in and to expand and, by the 1960s, piping for electric milking machines needed straight lines.

This historic barn that Edwin built is the only structure of its kind in Kewaunee County. Because it's octagonal, it was easy to expand with a rectangular addition constructed in the 1940s with recycled wood from a threshing and horse barn nearby. (Later round barns had the silo in the center, but this is an early round barn



Today the barn's owners, the Ratajczak family, say tourists traveling Hwy. 42 often stop and take photos of the barn. *Photo by Jill Dopke*.

because the feed alley is in the center with the silos on the outside.)

Orwin Burmeister said that Edwin built the barn "without the use of any kind of spirit level but rather to the horizontal plane of Lake Michigan." I checked to see how this might have worked when I visited with the one of the current owners, Joe Ratajczak, last summer. Standing near the barn I looked out towards Lake Michigan, and sure enough, it was a clear and perfect level. How clever of Edwin!

As I stepped inside the barn and looked down, I noticed how resourceful Edwin had been by using the locally abundant supply of native rock (limestone) found all along the Niagara Escarpment in Northeast Wisconsin for the outer walkway. The inner walkway, where the cattle stood, was planking beneath which huge beams radiated from the center like spokes in a wheel supporting the flooring. As I looked up through the central feed alley, I saw the same pattern of beams radiating from the very top. The space up there was enormous and would easily hold a vast amount of hay; with the feed alley in the middle, getting the hay down to the cattle would have been a very easy task.

Then Joe told me about the tornado of 1989 how it took the nearby neighbor's rectangular barn, but only shifted the octagonal barn a bit... So then it must be true; round barns *can* withstand high winds better than rectangular barns!

"This is Jill Dopke. Good day!"

Author's notes — For more information on the Norwegians in Manitowoc and Kewaunee Counties, check out <u>http://www.rbjerke.net/</u>.

— For more history on round barns in Wisconsin, read "*The Round and Five-or-More Equal Sided Barns of Wisconsin*" by Larry T. Jost (publ. 1980). This book can be found at the Algoma Library and includes a reference to Edwin Alberts' octagonal barn (*pg. 26*), or Orwin Burmeister's book, "*Treasured Memories*," can be found at the local libraries or purchased at the KCHS Research Center in Algoma.

KCHS RECOGNIZES VOLUNTEER EFFORTS

by Jerry Abitz

For the past 20 years or so, we have sponsored a Volunteer Dinner for the volunteers and their spouses. It is our way of saying *"Thank you"* to the many people who keep this organization running. Without their help, we could not exist.

This year dinner was held on Thursday, Sept. 17, at CJ's Supper Club in Kewaunee. Entertainment was provided by Cletus Bellin, a well-known local bandleader. Bellin, a Belgian-American, does a lot of music for Bohemian/Czech groups since he has some knowledge of the language. He sang a number of songs *a cappella;* the first were in Czech but most were in Belgian. He interpreted them into English, provided us with background details, and interspersed them with a little bit of history.

Four people were given framed Certificates of Merit—Wes Cox, Jill Dopke, Ray Michalski, and

Letter from the Editor

Our "Call for Volunteers" for the KCHS board in the last newsletter has gone unanswered. Although your financial support has been most gratifying these past few years with the expanded newsletter, the KCHS is a "sinking ship" without continuing community involvement. Without appropriate manager(s) and volunteers, we can envision the KCHS Research Center open only by request and then with a fee. Even our motivation to research and write appealing articles about Kewaunee County people/ places/events for the newsletter wavers as we look forward and see an end to the KCHS newsletter when we are gone. In so many ways, the future looks dismal at best unless volunteers of every type heed the call to share their talents.

We hope we have garnered enough trust over these last few years that we can count on you to help us figure out where the problem(s) lie that contribute — or fully explain — why we've received no offers to volunteer. Please contact me with any suggestions or criticisms you may have. Your name(s) will remain anonymous, but your comments will be presented to the board at the next meeting to help enable the KCHS to move into the future and continue to document, preserve, and disseminate Kewaunee County history. This is <u>your</u> historical society. Please help make it better.

Sincerely, Jerry Abitz <u>gabitz@centurytel.net</u> George F. Miller; their names will be included on a large plaque hanging in the Museum. Three were cited for their extra efforts that help the KCHS run smoothly—Carl J. Braun, Tom Duescher, and Virginia Johnson.

Other groups were honored, as follows:

~ Authors of newsletter articles—Mary Bohman, Al Briggs, Larry Mahlik, and Bruce Vandervest. Newsletter assemblers (prepare the newsletter for mailing)—Jerry Abitz, Joe Blazei, Julie Bloor, Gary Bothe, Al Briggs, Marsha Brown, Jill Dopke, Dona Fischer, Bevan Laird, and Marilyn Schleis.

~ Museum volunteers—Joe Blazei, Floy Born, Delva Bouril, Esther Burke, Helen Clinton, Judy Draeger, Phyllis Doperalski, Mildred Ihlenfeld, Mike Kostka, Jeff Kowalkchuk, Jill Kudick, Shirley Lepow, Sandi Lother, John Maier, Evelyn Raisleger, Mary Reckelberg, Judy Srnka, Jim Steffel, Dorothy Stangel, Gloria Urban, and Sandi Van Lieshout.

~ Research Center volunteers—Carl Braun, Wes Cox, Nancy Kratz, Hans Nell, Norman Paul, and Ken Wolske.

~ Also honored were Virginia Johnson, Research Center manager; Darlene Muellner, Museum curator; Virginia Kostka, Museum volunteer coordinator; Susan Slikkers, newsletter production editor; and Jerry Abitz and Jill Dopke, newsletter co-editors and article authors.

All were included in a handout at each place setting as a "take home" memento of this event.

Thank You

Dear Readers,

Because I know so many of you, sharing this news is difficult for me. I have recently resigned as both board member of the KCHS and co-editor of the *Historical Notes;* consequently, this will be my last issue. While I do not know what the future holds, I do hope to continue writing.

I would like to thank all of you for your kind words of support and encouragement for my historical writings over these past few years. You have always motivated me to do my very best, and to write articles that not only inform but tell a story about someone or something special in Kewaunee County. And there are so many special stories to tell...! Above all, you have allowed me to "live my passion" - researching and writing. For that, I thank you.

In sincere appreciation,

Jill Dogle

Friends of the Kewaunee County Historical Society

Our thanks to all that have given so generously in this time of uncertainty.

Note: If you have made a contribution and your name has not been included, please contact the editor.

We wish to acknowledge the people who have given so generously since our last publication (see list that follows). As an all-volunteer organization, money is always in short supply. And in a small county such as ours, there are no foundations or corporations to which we can turn for support. Your donations keep us alive and moving forward. We use your donations to fund our activities, and use them wisely.

As the year-end approaches, some of you may be looking for deductions as you itemize your tax deductions; for that purpose, we have included a self-addressed envelope for your convenience.

We are proud that this organization is working to preserve the history of this area. Make no mistake, there are many people who possess the knowledge of certain events, but most of it is not recorded anywhere. It is our job to ferret it out and preserve those memories.

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