



HISTORICAL NOTES

VOLUME XXV, No. 3

JULY 2011

MASTER VIOLIN MAKER FROM DYCKESVILLE

by Jerry Abitz



Louis Ropson, creating another of his magnificent stringed instruments. *Photos — All photos used in this article are used with permission from Massart Auctioneers, Inc. of Green Bay.*

insonville Chapel to take organ lessons from one of the nuns there. At 12, he played the organ at St. Louis church for the first time. By the age of 16, he was appointed the regular organist, a job he held for almost 50 years when deteriorating health caused him to finally resign that position; he also served as their choir director.

Because he found himself in difficulty playing plain and Gregorian chants, he took up the study of harmony and music theory from Reverend VandenElsen in Namur at 17. By age 24, he studied an entire year of counterpoint, playing the Namur organ in exchange for the lessons; then, at age 26, he studied advanced counterpoint with Father Dobbblesteen at Tonet.

If you wish to receive the *Historical Notes* in color and online, send your request to skslik@centurytel.net with your name and email address.

The Winter 2010 issue of the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*¹ contained an article on Helene Stratman-Thomas, a musicologist who traveled the state, taping musicians back in the 1940s. There were no cassette recorders at that time; instead, she lugged heavy, bulky equipment around to do the job. I believe she may have used a wire recorder. A university friend had one that I saw back in 1950. It was huge!

Two of the illustrations for this article were of Louis Ropson (spelled “Robson” in the article referenced above) and Emil Boulanger of Dyckesville. Wow! I didn’t know that anyone in Madison had ever heard of this tiny unincorporated village, straddling the Brown-Kewaunee County line. I must confess I hadn’t known Boulanger, but I had met Ropson when I sought him out about repairing a string instrument.

Ropson is a fairly common name in this region. What made Louis Ropson sufficiently famous that people at the University of Wisconsin were aware of him? It was not his farming ability, though he was a farmer, but rather that in his spare time he built violins, violas, and cellos.

Louis was born in 1903 to a farm family on County Road S, just outside of Dyckesville. That residence, with an addition, is now the home of the Chris Joniaux family.

At an early age, he showed a proclivity for music. At age 11, he walked nine miles roundtrip to the Rob-



(Cont. on page 2)

Master Violin Maker (cont. from page 1)



(Left) Louis Ropson as he constructs one of his stringed instruments. **(Middle)** Louis as he leans over his wife, Elsie, to watch her applying just one of many coats of their specially-formulated varnish. **(Right)** Louis as he sits outside his workshop, showing off a few of his masterpieces.

When he was 30, he discovered correspondence courses through the University of Wisconsin, and enrolled with Mrs. Boltz for music history and counterpoint. Stringed instruments intrigued him so, in 1942, he completed his first violin. It turned out so well that he just continued making them. They were sold to people who played in symphonies and music departments.

At his death in 1979, a record book listed 50 violas and 60 violins. A *Green Bay Press-Gazette* article from 1963 quoted him as producing 64 violins, 44 violas, and 8 cellos. One source noted he built about dozen every year, but there is no way of knowing the exact number of instruments he built.

He started with blueprints that he had drawn. The woods he used came from various sources — some were from the area, others imported from overseas. Building such an instrument is a slow, laborious process with long periods of drying the woods to ensure they do not warp. In some cases, he had to make special tools. His wife did the varnishing, which she mixed using their own formula. Since each instrument received 15 to 18 coats of varnish, the process could take up to a year to complete.

By the time Louis Ropson died in 1979, his fame had reached well beyond the local area. Both the *Green Bay Press-Gazette* and *The Milwaukee Journal* wrote articles on him. His completed instruments and tools were sold by Massart Auctioneers, Inc. of Green Bay. It was the quality of the sound that attracted professional musicians to buy Ropson's stringed instruments. That's not bad for a self-taught farm boy. What an amazing talent!

¹Janik, Erika. "Helene Stratman-Thomas : Wisconsin Songcatcher." *Wisconsin Magazine Of History*. Volume: 94; Issue: 2; pgs. 28-37. (2010-2011).

In Memoriam

The Kewaunee County Historical Society wants to take this opportunity to recognize the gifts of time and energy by two other directors who also have recently passed away (see pages 4 and 5 of this issue):

James L. Evans
(August 23, 1925 - April 25, 2011)

and

Olga M. (Schmidt) Sanderson
(November 1, 1919 - March 18, 2011)

Although no longer actively participating in the happenings of KCHS, we appreciate their contributions, and wish to extend our sincere and heartfelt condolences to their families.

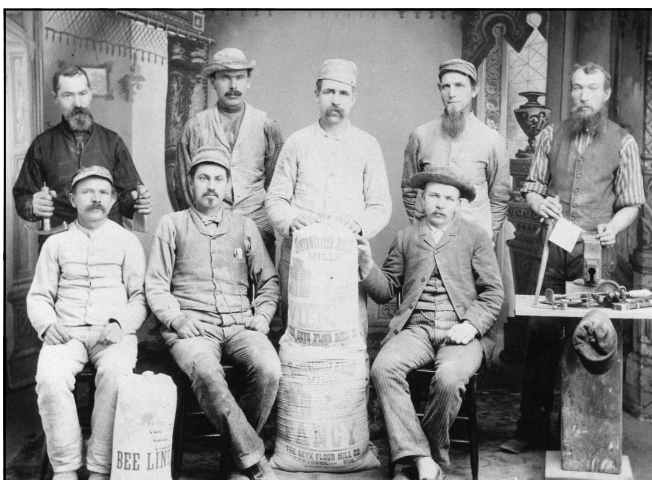
OLD MILL HELD MORE THAN GRAIN

by Tom Schuller

If you ever went into downtown Kewaunee and stopped at the W. Seyk feed mill in the 1930s, you were bound to find a lot more than oats and wheat there. It was the mill's office where you could find out the latest prices of your farm's produce, pick out this year's potatoes and onions to plant in the family garden, and generally what was happening to your friends and neighbors that your wife had missed when she listened on the party line telephone.

Also, on the shelf above the old rolltop desk with its pile of seed catalogs and tool manuals, you would find some of the treasures in Mr. Seyk's collection. There was a handmade beer mug fashioned from oak and cherry in the shape of a barrel; it was made by Joseph Baumgartner, an old Bohemian from Kewaunee, who made copper hoops to keep those tiny staves together — all in all there were over 200 staves used in its construction. Next to it was a set of cooper's tools used by Nick Stoffel when he was making flour barrels for the mill.

Then there was an ancient wheelwright's marking gauge, used in constructing steel-rimmed wooden wheels, brought over here from Bohemia by the late Joseph Kacarovsky; engraved on the gauge is a picture of a millstone and the Bohemian national emblem. Also from the old country is a steel half-moon scale, still accurate after countless years of use. Other tools on the shelf included a handmade brace for drilling holes in logs and a four-foot-long log scaler from the company's lumber mill that once stood where the Coast Guard station is now. Oxen shoes, similar to horseshoes but in two pieces to fit on the bottom of the split hoof, made by



Seyk's Mill crew (1887). See story (right column) for description. Photo courtesy of KCHS photo collection.



Seyk's Mill on Harrison at Milwaukee Street in Kewaunee (circa 1900s). Photo courtesy of KCHS photo collection.

Anton [Stetka] and a 60-year old balance scale completed the shelves' collection.

Next to it was an 1876 Kewaunee County plat map (now found in the Jail Museum). Pictured in the margins were the residences, sawmill, and assorted buildings owned by Wojta Stransky from West Kewaunee Town on the mill property that was owned by the Seyks. Also on the map are the old Grecian style courthouse, the school that once stood up on the hill, the Steamboat House that the Karsten Hotel replaced in 1914, and the various piers that used to dot the shoreline of Lake Michigan but are no more.

Two large photos completed the mill's collection. One is Seyk's Mill crew from 1887 (*see photo at left*). Shown in the group are the late "Uncle Joe" as head miller, August Heidman (*seated front right*) and Eman Babor were his assistants. The engineer was Anton Stetka and the flour packers were John Lutien and Frank Wanninger while the cooper was Nick Stoffel and the teamster was Chris Rohde.

The other photo (*not shown here*) shows the Slauson and Grimmer Co. millworkers, taken in 1875. Old-timers in the photo were Jack Culnan, Joseph Culnan, Tim Culnan, John Hromas, Jim Johnson, John Johnson, Joseph Lain, Frank Leque, Albert Lietz, John Lutien, August Nehls, Joseph F. Valecka, Charles Wattawa, and John Wattawa.

But all things change with the passage of time — Kacarovsky was shortened to Kacer, many of these names are now absent from the community, and none of the above occupations exist either. In the 1990s, a group tried to save the mill from being razed and turned it into a tourist attraction, but that didn't happen. Where the mill once stood is now the park adjacent to the tug, Ludington.

KCHS LOSES TWO DIRECTORS

by Jerry Abitz

With the recent loss of two board members, many of us have been in a state of shock. Filling board positions always brings the opportunity for new friendships and connections, but deaths create holes that only memories can fill.

Joe Blazei was a director for the KCHS since April of 1972, and elected as treasurer a year later, a position he held for 38 years. Joe's attendance was exemplary with few absences over the years. He had a curiosity for everything; he knew everyone, and was a walking encyclopedia of our area's history and facts.

George Miller's tenure on the board was shorter but his presence was crucial. He helped us change direction both in our operations as well as money management. He gave us a firm footing in the Algoma community with the establishment of our Research Center/History Room, and also created the program to videotape key members of the community and publicize them over the community access channels.

Although retired from the board, George still attended meetings whenever Joe could provide transportation. Together, the three of us would adjourn for lunch at Hudson's to visit and reminisce about the past. No question, I enjoyed their company, their enthusiasm, and their input. But I really miss them most because they were excellent friends.



JOSEPH J. BLAZEI (July 25, 1932 - March 19, 2011)

We buried Joe today* after a week of surreal mystery. Last Tuesday morning my wife and I got a phone call from the Kewaunee Sheriff's office asking if we knew the whereabouts of Joe. His car had been parked at Bruemmer Park for some time, but a recent snowfall and no footprints led to an investigation. Mail from the previous Saturday was still in his mailbox. The police entered his home only to find an empty house. They found his evening meal had been set out to thaw and was now past its prime.

The only thing I could offer the police was that his doctor had wanted him to walk after his most recent hip replacement surgery. I knew that he sometimes walked the along the lakeshore. His walks there are what had caused him to investigate where the frequent lumps of coal came from, which, in turn, brought about the article he wrote about the S.S. Emerald (published on page 3 of the *Historical Notes* January 2011 issue (Vol. XXV, No. 1)).

All week long we held onto any hope that Joe would turn up, but the situation looked dire from the start. On Thursday, after one of the heaviest snowfalls ever, a tracking dog (*I've been told a bloodhound*) found his body slumped against a tree. As none of us were aware of any health problems, we (the KCHS directors I have spoken with) rationalize that it was a heart attack. Although an autopsy was done, no results have been announced yet.

As a member of the board, he was a fond booster of this organization. In presenting his treasurer's report at the annual meeting, he always gave a synopsis of our activities, describing events in superlative terms.

Behind the scenes, he supplemented activities with cash contributions. At the annual Christmas potluck, Joe always supplied a roaster full of chicken and potato wedges. He was the perennial volunteer at various functions, such as manning the display table at Ag Heritage Days, filling in as a volunteer at the Museum (sometimes filling in for the no-shows), showing up for work day at the Museum, etc. His enthusiasm was unbounded.

As expected, the funeral was well attended. As Joe was its treasurer also, many members of the Foresters were present with their colorful sashes. KCHS president, Tom Schuller, was called upon to say a few words about Joe. I almost fell off my pew when he started to read the interview I had written about him a year ago in the KCHS newsletter. I felt my buttons would pop, I was that proud! But when the congregation sang, "How Great Thou Art," the tears began to flow and my voice cracked momentarily. I regained my composure and sang to the very end.

Driving home after the meal that was served, I began to reminisce about our last breakfast together. We did this periodically. He was always a source of information. I could use him as my sounding board about anything connected to the newsletter.

At one point, I had said to him, "Joe, you are of Polish ancestry, and that is a rarity in this county. I've written about the Bohemians and the Belgians, but never about the Polish around St. Hedwig's Church in West Kewaunee. Why did your ancestors come? Why did they leave Poland? Why did they come to Kewaunee County?"

And, of course, he told me. So Joe's legacy will continue as you hear more about our conversations — and his ancestry — in future newsletters.

*This article was written on March 29, 2011.



Joe Blazei, former KCHS treasurer. Photo previously supplied by Joe Blazei.

GEORGE F. MILLER

(November 9, 1920 - May 7, 2011)

The latest casualty amongst our directors was George Miller of Algoma. He lived to a ripe old age, and survived both of his wives. Sadness to have a friend go is normal, but George did so much for the KCHS that he is, indeed, a great loss.

From time to time, a new person enters your life that you want to emulate. It may be a personal trait that you admire, that person may be so engaging that it energizes what you do, s/he may be so enthusiastic, so curious, or have the right connections that enable you to expand your horizons. So it was with George when he became a director.

George was a willing worker as well as a booster of this organization. When he was recruited, he invited me (then president) to have lunch with him at Hudson's to talk over things and get better acquainted, which is when I learned we had similar backgrounds. He had been a resident of the county for much longer than I. Because of his position as a lawyer and having married into a prominent Algoma family, he had knowledge of the community's mores and influence within the community's leaders.

KCHS was an organization that revolved primarily around the operation of the Jail Museum in Kewaunee. Despite our founding in 1921, KCHS had not gained much recognition elsewhere in the county. The Museum's collection was formed around the artifacts collected by one of its earliest entrepreneurs, Edward Decker. Over the years, more artifacts and documents came to us when elderly citizens passed away and families either closed up or sold their homes.

There was no place to examine paper documents or photo collections, although a small desk was provided when a wall cabinet was installed in the museum's office. Unfortunately, that was not sufficient for doing research. Subsequently, we contacted a Kewaunee business owner about renting his walkout basement as a research center and thought we had a deal; the building was sold, however, and the new owner wanted nothing to do with us.

At this point, George stepped up. He suggested locating the proposed center in Algoma and gave us some leads. Ten years and three relocations later, we are located in the heart of Algoma's downtown in a building everyone recognizes as the "Kohlbeck" building, named after a long-lived haberdashery. This move and getting the Governor's Archives Award in 2005 have certainly increased our visibility in Algoma and much of the county.

Over the years, KCHS has been the recipient of gifts from several estates. Investing those funds in U.S. Treasury notes at a low interest rate caused George to speak up. He steered us to a fund which, even in these

past several years, has had a much better interest rate. George seemed to have the knowledge we were lacking or had the right connections to help us forge ahead.

He was also instrumental in another key program of KCHS. Every spring the Wisconsin Historical Society sponsored workshops on various topics. George attended one on recording interviews with people. He came

home and instigated a videotaping program that today numbers over 100 interviews of individuals. He recruited Merle Colburn to do the taping and arranged with the City of Algoma to use their taping facilities at City Hall. These tapes were then shown on the community access channels in Algoma and Kewaunee.

George and I had a few things in common. Both of us were raised on a farm. We attended UW-Madison where we had the same college advisor, although not at the same time. We both started out as agriculture teachers and served in the military—he in WWII, and I in the Korean War.

We both could trace back our ancestry to Germany, although mine was not as exotic as his. His father was working on a ship that sailed from Marseilles, France, to New York when World War I broke out. The ship was impounded and could not leave. He collected his wages, left the ship, and worked on truck farms in New Jersey. Gradually he worked his way westward to Iowa, where he heard of cheap land in the cutover regions* of Wisconsin. He eventually purchased a farm in the Park Falls area where George was born.

I valued George as a friend. Every year an invitation would arrive, inviting my wife and me to watch the Shanty Days parade as it passed by his house. "Bring your lawn chairs and a dish to pass." I remember, too, his 80th birthday party.

Age has a way of taking its toll, and George could no longer drive. Although he was retired from the board, the late Joe Blazei would pick him up and bring him to the KCHS meetings. Afterwards the three of us would adjourn to Hudson's for lunch and a lot of reminiscing. The last time was about six months ago.

*Cutover region is the term applied to the northern areas of Wisconsin after the virgin forests had been harvested. The logging companies owned all this land, which they wanted to sell to settlers.



George F. Miller, KCHS emeritus director. Photo by Bruce Heidmann.

NEWS FROM THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Report from the Trenches

Compiled by Glennie Wilding-White

Jailhouse Museum — Darlene Muellner, KCHS curator, reminds our friends in the county that the Jailhouse Museum is now open for the summer, and needs — wait for it... Volunteers! Yes! Call, e-mail, or holler from the rooftop to let her know you're available; her e-mail is d.muellner@sbcglobal.net, and her phone number is on the back page under "Board of Directors."

2011 Annual Meeting Report — This year's meeting was held in Dyckesville, located in the Town of Red River. While the attendance was not large, Marie De Baker came with a packet of articles and artifacts from the hamlet of Darbellay; among them was a ledger from the store which once existed there, and a rubber stamp from the Darbellay post office located in this general store. Lorraine Dewane came with an assortment of photos. (Her grandfather had worked at Barrett's Dock.) A question raised about the pier run by the Lardo family revealed information of which the KCHS was not aware. Donna Schott, a descendent of François Petiniot, the leader of the 1850s' Belgian migration, sent Jerry Abitz a copy of the patent for Petiniot's 40-acre farm signed by President James Buchanan.

Next year's annual meeting is tentatively scheduled for spring in the Town of Franklin.

Getting Digitized — Recently five members of the Board traveled to Madison to attend a seminar on museum/archival software. Jerry Abitz, Darlene Muellner, Gloria Peterson, Mark Teske, and Glennie Wilding-White listened and learned as the Past Perfect software package was explained and demonstrated, with examples from organizations using the package. This trip was

part of our overall upgrade of capabilities in the digital world. Glennie is also exploring other software specifically designed for museums and collectors.

In addition, Deb Anderson of Cofrin Library will be making a follow-up visit to make more detailed recommendations on our set-up; also, a computer consultant in Algoma has been in to evaluate the hardware and review necessary upgrades, as well as the cost involved. Internet service will be available soon and, with it, email capabilities. By the end of this year, we can expect to see major improvements in searching and retrieval of objects and information in our office and museum. At that point, we can focus on website set-up and development appropriate to our specific needs.

New Director, Arletta Bertrand — Arletta Bertrand was recently appointed to the Board of Directors of KCHS. Following Joe Blazei's death, she took over the duties of Treasurer on a temporary basis, and was elected to that office at the next Board meeting and confirmed at the Annual Meeting on May 7.

She has many years of experience with nonprofit accounting, including 18 years with St. Mary's Luxemburg as Treasurer, and as Financial Secretary for St. Mary's School Board (Luxemburg). She has also volunteered for Kewaunee County Human Services with the Foot Clinic in Luxemburg, and has been a volunteer at the Historical Society since last summer.

Arletta was born in Lincoln to Joseph and Dolores (Stache) Deprey, into a family of two sisters and one brother. She grew up on a farm in Euren, attended LaFayette Grade School (a one-room school), and graduated from Casco High School in 1962.

"In 1966 I married the love of my life, Gerald Bertrand," she writes. "We have four children: Jerry (Pam), Jacqueline (Duane) Srnka, Jodie (Mike) Glish, and Jennifer (John) McCaffery. All live in Luxemburg except Jennifer and John, who live in Chicago. We are blessed with twelve grandchildren."


"Gerald and I farmed the Bertrand family farm that has been in the family for over 125 years. After 35 years, we moved to the Village of Luxemburg in 2000. I then started working for APAC Customer Service in Green Bay while Gerald continued farming with our son, Jerry, on the home farm. He is presently on the Luxemburg Village Board."

"My interests are basketball and football, especially following the Badgers. Gerald and I have done the genealogy of our families — the Bertrands, Depreys, and Staches, as well as my grandmother's family, the Lorges, going back to Europe on all of them."

Arletta stepped quickly and confidently into the duties of Treasurer, and brings valuable experience to her position. *We welcome her to the Board!*



THIS ISSUE'S GUEST AUTHORS...

 **Tom Schuller** (see page 3) — Currently president of the Kewaunee County Historical Society, Tom is a self-proclaimed information junkie — he's been collecting stories about Kewaunee County since he was first asked to join the Society. He and his wife, Bonnie, live in a restored Victorian home built in 1890 which is surrounded by over 3,000 plants.



(cont. on page 7)

CALENDAR

AHR: Agricultural Heritage & Resources Inc., located at Heritage Farm, N2251 Hwy 42, five miles south of Kewaunee. Phone: 920-388-0604. Website: www.agriculturalheritage.org

WHS: Wisconsin Historical Society, 816 State Street, Madison, WI 53706. Phone: 608-264-6400. Website: www.wisconsinhistory.org. Kewaunee County is part of the Northeast Region of WHS.

Report from the Trenches *(cont. from page 6)*

Wayside Chapel Project Update —

Before Cletus Bellin died, he had approached the KCHS about preserving the unique wayside chapels found in the Belgian areas of Brown, Door, and Kewaunee Counties. He proposed producing a brochure listing all of them with a brief history and a map showing their locations. His rationale was if we can point out their importance, it may spur efforts to maintain and preserve them. In the back of his mind also was the decision by the local Catholic bishop to acknowledge the visions of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Adele Brice in the nineteenth century and the reported miraculous healings which caused an uptick in religious pilgrims to the area.

Jerry Abitz had contacted the Door County Historical Society and the Peninsula Belgian-American Society to enlist their aid. Together he and Cletus spoke to the directors of the Brown County Historical Society to enlist them as well.

With Bellins's death, the project was suspended. Since then, a series of meetings have taken place in Dyckesville to set things in motion again. We enlisted the aid of Don Kraft from the BCHS to design a brochure that meets the group's requirements. We now have a mock-up to share with the committee for their approval at an upcoming meeting, which then can be taken to a printer; hopefully the brochure will go to press shortly.

Jim Lampereur of the Belgian-American group has taken photos of each chapel which can be used to produce a booklet with a more complete history as a future project. This could be marketed to interested parties such as local citizens as well as visiting religious pilgrims.



One of the Belgian wayside chapels, this one located at St. Martin's Cemetery on County Road K in Tonet. Photo by Jerry Abitz.

Kewaunee County Historical Society (KCHS) monthly board meetings — 10:00a, second Saturdays (July 9, August 13, September 10, October 8). History Center, 219 Steele Street, Algoma. Info: 920-487-2516.

August

Sat., Aug. 6 — WHS Northeast Regional Meeting. New Holstein. Hosted by New Holstein Historical Society. New Holstein Community Center, Kiwanis Park, 1725 Silver Moon Lane, New Holstein, WI 53061. **Presentations** on "Quality Exhibits on a Tight Budget" and "Moonshining in the Holyland." WHS updates, round-table, and tours. **Cost:** \$20/person by July 29; includes lunch, events and tours. KCHS directors who wish to attend should contact Arlette Bertrand. **Send registration to:** Treasurer: New Holstein Historical Society, PO Box 144, New Holstein, WI 53061-0144. For more info, contact Terry Thiessen, NHHS president (920-898-4100; tethiessen@frontier.com).

Sat.-Sun., Aug. 6-7 — AHR Czech/Kolache Fest at Heritage Farm, N2251 Hwy 42, five miles south of Kewaunee. Traditional Czech food and Sunday Mass. Details: 920-388-0604. Website: www.agriculturalheritage.org.

September

KCHS — Kewaunee Jailhouse Museum closes for the winter after Labor Day weekend.

KCHS Volunteer Dinner — Date/place *tba*.

Fri.-Sat., Sept. 23-24, WHS — The 2011 Local History and Historic Preservation Conference will be held in Stevens Point. Don't miss the largest event in Wisconsin for local history and historic preservation! You'll have ample opportunity to mingle with others, share ideas, and make connections. We have 24 one-hour educational sessions and 12 half-day workshops planned to show you how increase your ability to provide perspective about the past by developing new ways to reach your patrons or how to improve current outreach. Topics include: Funding restoration projects, rehabbing local government buildings, developing an interpretive program, engaging students during museum visits, optimizing social media and online presence, volunteer programs best practices, making cost-effective, quality exhibits for small museums. For more information, visit the Wisconsin Historical Society website at http://www.wisconsinhistory.org/localhistory/annual_convention.asp.

Sat.-Sun., Sept. 24-25, AHR — Agricultural Heritage Days at Kewaunee County Fairgrounds in Luxemburg. Details: 920-388-0604, or visit the website at www.agriculturalheritage.org.

October

Sun., Oct. 2, AHR — Oktoberfest at Heritage Farm. Sunday Mass, German food demonstrations and exhibits, German dinner and dancing. Details: 920-388-0604, or visit www.agriculturalheritage.org.

Friends of the Kewaunee County Historical Society

~~ 2011 Donations ~~

We thank all of you for your continuing support of the Society. In recognition of your contribution(s), you should have received a personal thank you note from us. Since we are a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, these donations can be used as deductions on your income taxes.

Note: The listing below is based upon donations received Feb. 27 - May 12, 2011. If your gift was received at a later date and not listed, it will be acknowledged in the next issue. If your name is not listed and you gave, please contact our treasurer, Arletta Bertrand (920-845-2972).

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KCHS

Historical Notes

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