

ISSUES & OPPORTUNITIES

COMMUNITY BACKGROUND

The Town of Star Prairie has a long history of settlement from the time of lumber and railroad barons to the rich agricultural heritage and recreational opportunities offered by the town's many water resources. The following history is a compilation of historical resources, and personal accounts of local residents.

The Town of Star Prairie was created July 28, 1856. It was settled by German, Norwegian, Irish, French, English and Polish immigrants. It is located at latitude 450945N and longitude 0923536W. The town originally included the towns of Stanton and Erin Prairie. Stanton was divided off in 1870. The town has three large water bodies, Cedar Lake and Squaw Lake and the Apple River, which crosses the town diagonally from the northeast to the southwest.

At one time there were three dams on the Apple River within the town. There is only one remaining dam. The two dams that have been removed were built by the New Richmond Roller Mills Company for hydroelectric power generation. The Huntingdon Dam, located in Section 11, was built in 1903. The McClure Dam, located 1.5 miles downstream of the Huntingdon Dam in Section 14, was built in 1913. Both dams changed ownership a few times but eventually were abandoned in 1965 after a break in the dike separating the canal and the main river channel below the Huntingdon Dam diverted the water flow away from the powerhouse. The McClure Dam was removed in 1968 and the Huntingdon Dam was removed in 1969. The cost was \$50,000 and \$35,000 respectively. The Riverdale dam, located at the end of the Riverdale Flowage in Section 31, is still in operation producing hydroelectric power for the Xcel Energy Company. According to Xcel Energy, the Riverdale hydro plant is 0.6 megawatts. The plant is remote controlled. There is a powerhouse and two generating units and a narrow overflow spillway. It is interesting to note that despite having three hydro-electric dams in the Town of Star Prairie, not everyone was able to get electricity. It was expensive, \$25 per month, and sometimes people had to sign up for five years before they would be hooked up. Local residents noted that it wasn't until after World War II that everyone in the Town had electricity. Wall Street is believed to be the last area to receive service.

Another important water body in the Town is Strand Lake. Originally named Rose Lake, it was changed to Oakwood Lake and finally settled at Strand Lake. Numerous arrowheads have been found around the lake. It is probable that there was an Indian campsite or settlement there for a time. There is a possible Indian Mound in Section 23, very close to Strand Lake.

Within the Town of Star Prairie are two unincorporated hamlets Johannesburg and Huntingdon. Johannesburg was historically referred to as New Johannesburg by local residents. It was named for Johannes Johnson who settled there between 1870 and 1875. Johannesburg was generally located in Section 15 and around the old Town Hall and Outpost Bar in Section 21. It originally consisted of a school, icehouse, cheese factory, feed mill and combination grocery store and gas station. The school was used as the Star Prairie Town Hall until February of 2007. The cheese factory was below the old town hall along the Apple River. It is believed to have been built around 1919 and burned down around 1940. The feed mill was operated by Alvin "Six" Olson. He was so called because he was fascinated by 6-cylinder vehicles. The grocery store and gas station is now the Outpost Bar and Grill. It was a popular spot for locals to congregate to hear the latest news.

The original Town Hall was located in the parking lot of the old Town Hall. It was a popular location for evening dances and plays. There was a wood stove right in the middle of the floor. The original Town Hall is now a part of the Outpost Bar and Grill. Local residents told the story as follows: In the early 1970's the original Town Hall was moved one night to the Outpost Bar and Grill, it was the addition to the north side of the existing building, nearest the river, according to local citizens. The DNR refused to let the bar add on or expand because it was too close to the river, so local residents decided to take the matter into their own hands. During the night the building was floated down the river then hauled out of the water and connected to the existing structure to become the bar portion of the Bar and Grill.

Huntingdon was named for the Canadian town of Huntingdon, and settled in 1854. It was known first as McClure's Rock. The first settlers were Mr. White, his wife Lydia and their daughter Lydia. Mr. White died in 1855 and was the first white man to be buried in the Town of Star Prairie. In 1856, C.H. Burrows and John McClure moved to Huntingdon. The community originally had a flour mill, built by the Bowron brothers in 1854. The Bowron family was from Huntingdon, Canada. It must be noted that the spelling of Huntingdon whether with a "t" or "d" has varied in various sources, however the plat of Huntingdon is the official record. The mill was situated on the creek that flows out of Cedar Lake. The mill, which operated until 1949, ground wheat for flour. During World War I it was the only source of flour for local residents. An area merchant said that the "best buckwheat flour in the world came from Huntingdon." People came from all around, even as far as Canada, to get wheat flour from there.

In addition to the mill, Huntingdon also had several homes, picnic area, a ballfield, general store and two churches that were built not even a block apart. One was the Swedish Mission Church and the other the German Lutheran Church. Both were tall, white churches and the services were said in Swedish and German. Both churches are gone, one burned down and the other was tore down.

Many of the original homes still stand. People picnicked around the falls and dam and the Annual Spring School Picnic was held there. Huntingdon's ball field was where the mobile home park is now located. It had concession stands and vendors. Huntingdon's general store was in what is now the Cedar Creek Inn. There also used to be little cabins along the shoreline by the dam that were rented out to visitors. Boat rental was also available and many people used to fish along the dam. There was a Chicken Hatchery located between Huntingdon and the Village of Star Prairie.

In addition to the Outpost Bar & Grill and Cedar Creek Inn, there are two other local landmark restaurants in the Town of Star Prairie. Meister's on Cedar Lake has been around since the 1920's. It was originally called Cedar Lake Bar and it was built by Donnie Walsh. The top of the bar was very unusual. When it was built, locals were allowed to glue down silver dollars and put their names under them. When finished the whole top of the bar was covered in silver dollars. However, when the first owner, Walsh, died the next owner removed the top of the bar and no one knows where it is today.

The second local landmark is the River's Edge Restaurant. It was originally built in 1921. The original name was Nig's Shack, then it became River Dale. It has always been known for good food and fine dining. For a short while in the early 1940's, it also provided gambling with 40 slot machines and five blackjack tables. Then in 1946, the Jack Raleigh family purchased the restaurant, changed the name to River's Edge, removed the slot machines and blackjack tables and added floating down the Apple River. It has been in the same family ever since. The River's Edge has had several famous visitors. There are rumors that John Dillinger and his gang stopped one afternoon during the 1920's or 1930's. It is documented that Alice Longworth Roosevelt,

Fitzpatrick of “Voice of the Globe” and Charles Kuralt both visited. Additional information about the restaurant is available from the present owners who have documented its extensive history.

During the Prohibition Era, many Star Prairie residents needed to supplement their incomes. It became very popular to supply the Twin Cities with illegal liquor. People never really questioned or wondered about smoke coming out of a Chicken Coop – they knew people were making moonshine. There is a local story about a moonshine run to Minnesota. A local resident had a Model T Ford auto that had a special “tank” on the bottom of the Model T. This tank would be filled with moonshine for deliveries. One day after crossing the Stillwater Bridge, the Model T got a flat tire. While stopped, a local cop stopped to help. He commented several times about how heavy that Model T was but luckily never tried to figure out why it was so heavy. The moonshine business died out when local residents “heard” that Al Capone was taking over. Local operations very quickly “dried up.”

For many years, County Road CC from County Road C to Cedar Lake was known as “Swede Road” because almost everyone who lived along the road was Swedish. Wall Street was named that because a wealthy local doctor lived on the road. According to local residents, he was known as a “plaster” doctor and while he would generally not be considered legitimate today, at that time people came from all over to be treated by this famous doctor. He built a “fancy and expensive” farm and raised chester-white pigs which were famous and sought-after. He is also rumored to have been one of the investors in the Foshay Tower in Minneapolis. In the 1950’s the straight stretch of Wall Street was a popular spot for local boys to race their cars.

According to local resident Vern Nelson, the worst storm in local memory occurred in 1952 when seven barns were destroyed along County Road H, east of STH 35. The storm was thought to be a tornado, but that was not confirmed.

On January 1, 1975, local Town resident Ron Engh started a newspaper, The Apple River Journal. The newspaper was based out of the Village of Star Prairie, but covered parts of Polk and St. Croix County all around the Village, including the Town of Star Prairie. It ran through 1976 and provides a great deal of interesting information on life in the town during the 1970’s, plus it offered historical sketches of early settlement days. Engh also started the Park Art Fair that now takes place each year in Mary Park in New Richmond. When Engh started the fair it was called the Barn Art Fair and was held in the barn on his property. Local artists displayed their arts and crafts and he also had a Children’s Theater to get the local children involved and interested.

Star Prairie originally was served by several rural schools but only five were located within the Town’s boundaries. All rural school were closed by 1961 when the state required country schools to attach to a high school district or suffer the loss of state aid. District #4 School, called Squaw Lake School was located in Section 9, in the southwest quarter. The building is now a single-family home. Old Mill Road which gave access to the school now ends at CTH CC and does not cross Section 9. The District #8 School was known as the Wall Street School. It was located in Section 23 in the southeast quarter. The school house is still there and it is now the Berget House, but it has been expanded and modified from the original structure. Local resident Genevieve Francois, who still lives on her family’s original farm, indicated that before the Wall Street school was built her family’s granary was the school house. It is believed to have been the first school in Star Prairie and that it was in that location since 1868. The District #3 School was known as the Riverdale School and was located in the northwest quarter of Section 29. It is a single-family home. The Riverview School, District #6, also known as Johannesburg, was located at the old Town Hall, it was built in 1923. Residents remember attending school for

only about 6 months of the year. They were needed to help work at home and around the farm and also had no way to get to school during the worst of the winter weather. The Huntington School, District #5, was west of the intersection of County Roads C and H on the north side of the road. It has since been torn down.

The St. Croix County Health Center is also located in the Town. It was built before 1897 and was originally known as the St. Croix County Asylum for Insane. It provided a place for those with mental health problems and those who had no family or any place else to live. It also operated as an Old Folks Home for a while. For many years the Health Center operated in conjunction with the County Farm. The patients did all the work on the farm, gardening, butchering, dairy. They raised all their own food. The farm was very renowned for its registered Holstein cattle. There are two cemetery plots on the Health Center property. Residents with no family members were buried there. Also well-known Administrator Sumner Bright is buried in the Cemetery that is on the hill. He served as the Administrator at the County Health Center for over 35 years.

The Town's agricultural heritage is also very strong. Two farms in the town, have received Century Farm Awards through the Wisconsin State Fair award program. The Pamela and Bruce Emerson Farm, 2087 CTH CC, was established in 1889. The Lyle and Ruth Halvorson farm, 1987 93rd Street, was established in 1881. There are also several other historic farmsites in the town, including: Gerald Backes farm, 110th St.; Doug Rivard farm, Polk/St. Croix Road; and Jeff Levy & MaryEllen Stewart house and farm, CTH CC.

The Outpost Bar and Grill and owners Jim and Jan Jensen became famous recently for setting a new Guinness World Record for the world's longest hot dog. The Jensen's along with Jesse Waidelich of Deer's Food Locker in Deer Park, decided to try to break the record as part of a fund raiser for playground equipment for the new Star Prairie Town Hall. On September 2, 2006, the owners cooked and made the hot dog, including the bun. They were notified on September 20, 2006 that they had broken the record. The hot dog's official length was 83 feet, nine inches. The old record was 57.5 feet.

Sources:

St. Croix County...1976 A Bicentennial Report on St. Croix County...Past and Present;
Historical Map of St. Croix County, published by the St. Croix County Historical Society,
 The Octagon House, 1004 Third Street, Hudson, WI October 1974.

Heritage Areas of St. Croix County, UW-Extension 1976.

Natural Area Inventory, West Central Wisconsin 1976.

Remembering Rural Schools of St. Croix County

St. Croix County Extension Homemakers Rural School Committee 1991.

Rivertowns.net website.

Oxcart Days, 1854-1940 by Wallace W. Silver, publication date unknown.

Life-long town residents, including: 21-year Town Board member Vern Nelson, Alice Talmage,
 Yvonne Brotzler, John Raleigh, Mike McNamara and Bruce Emerson.

Members of the Star Prairie Plan Commission.