Landmark
Summer Autumn 2010
Dixon, Richard

YOUNGSTERS DIG UP FAMILY TREES

Waukesha Freeman, April 8, 1961

"I'm the newest twig on the family tree," wrote Cassandra Austreng of Genesee Depot in her entry in the county-wide "Digging Up Ancestors" contest.

Sponsored by the Waukesha County Historical Society, the contest was open to fourth through eighth grades. It ended last week.

Entries came in by car and mail. David Baehler's fourth grade entry from Tamarack School in Hartland came in the sheriff's car and reposed on the grand piano in the museum until it was found and checked in.

There were 52 ways of presenting family histories from books shaped like trees to oversized charts to the 8-foot entry of Candace Peters of Sussex.

Ethnic origins are the main concern of most of the entries stacked in the museum's library. Margaret Elsa Davis, daughter of Glenn Davis of New Berlin, wrapped her big family tree with ribbons representing the nationalities of her ancestors: yellow for Welsh; white for German; red, white and blue stripe for English; green for Irish and plaid for Scotch.

Nobody was "pure" anything. There were Germans, English, French, Norwegians, Poles, Serbians, Irish and so-called Americans who were really only earlier pioneers.

"We are true Americans," Gary Jorgensen of Waukesha wrote. "I am one-half Dane, one-fourth German and one-fourth Irish."

Susan Laney is descended from pioneer Welsh, English, Norwegian and German stock. Gary Suhm of Prospect Hill, who is half German and half Welsh, claims a great-great-grandfather with a name William William Williams.

Youngsters' ancestors included the actual first settlers who arrived on the *Mayflower*, the rugged pioneers of our county and the refugees of this generation.

Kathleen Caldwell of New Berlin worked out her complete family tree to prove that she was not only the descendent of John Alden and Priscilla Mullens of *Mayflower* and Longfellow fame, but of "Elder" Brewster and William Bradford, too. Brenda Sprague of Muskego told about some of her Sprague ancestors

coming to America with Governor Endicott's group in 1628.

Several county children claim ancestors in the Revolutionary War, including Richard Dixon of Eagle whose ancestor was a Minuteman, Diane Nieman of Muskego, the Lurveys of Dousman, Warren Scott Dewey of Mukwonago and Betsey Nolan of Prospect Hill.

A surprise result of this contest is the common ancestor found linking Warren Scott Dewey and Betsey Nolan. According to their charts, their common ancestor was Lt. John Hollister who emigrated to America in 1642. He was a land owner who lived in a two-story red house on the Majaug River in the Wethersfield and Connecticut colonies. (Scott and Betsey will not know about it until they read this story.)

Rugged pioneer stories were included as one told by Penelope Brow of Ottawa. "You made it or starved to death," she wrote. "Charles and his bride sat by the stove and stuffed twisted wads of flax straw into the stove to keep from freezing to death. They gathered a shed full of dried cow chips in the fall to burn for fuel in the winter."

Margaret Davis told about her great-great-great-grandparents, George and Isabell McFarlane who were born a few days apart, grew up together with the same mother or foster mother, married, pioneered and died only a few days apart. They were buried side by side in a cornfield near the Bark River, their graves marked by two limestone slabs. They'd never been separated except for those last few days.

Most colorful of the pioneer stories was James Thompson's of New Berlin who told about his great-great-uncle "Snowshoe" Thompson. This historic character was the subject of two published books: Flying Snowshoes by Elyn Teal and *Snowshoe Thompson* by Adrian Stoutenberg and Laura Baker. Old "Snowshoe," born in Telemarken, Norway, carried mail on homemade snowshoes across the Sierra Nevada Mountains from Placerville to Genoa in Carson Valley, Nevada.

"In 1951 my sister and I took a day off from school," Barbara Koehn of Mill Valley in Muskego wrote. "We became citizens of the United States of America."

A child of refugees, Barbara's story told of bombings, starvation, fear and refugee camps. The happy ending for her story:

"Daddy and Mama were married. In 1948 they came to America. They have been happy ever since."

Gerald Heinz Stark of Dousman, a fourth grader, has filled his book with birth certificates. Only the two first pages are in English. Included in the back is his father's own story, written in German, of his own family and ancestors. The certificates are his father's from Germany, his mother's from Latvia, his sister's from Poland and his own from the United States.

Millie Potkonjak of Butler is named after her grandmother who was killed by the Communists in Yugoslavia in 1942. The members of her family held many honorable occupations over there. Now that they are in America, they "send something for the priest back home."

"I celebrate Serbian Christmas on Jan. 7," she wrote.

Several young people have not finished their search for ancestors. This contest has really only gotten them started, they say.

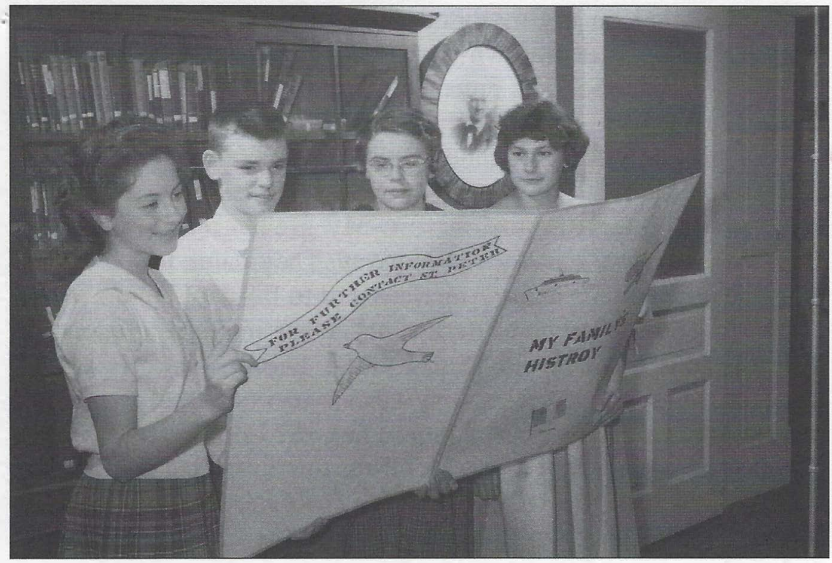
Charles Simmons Jr., Oconomowoc, said, "It is said that if we were to trace back 40 generations, we would find 440,000 ancestors."

And plenty of ancestors have been found!

Christine Lachowin of Sussex, searching for hers came up with a pretty clear picture of her family, too. But just in case she missed any, she drew a dove on the back of her family's genealogical chart, and wrote: "For further information, please contact St. Peter."

Joann Adkinson, New Berlin, who claimed she was "out on a limb of the family tree," told: "My grandmother liked to sew and play games with her family. She liked to square dance which was fun then. She went to church in a wagon." Joann told about the day "my grandfather went hunting with his dog and something happened and he cut his foot very badly. His dog went home and got help. He died a few days later. My father was there when he died."

Donna McIntyre, Mukwonago, said, "My great-grandfather Hutton studied in Paris, France, for the priesthood, but he never became a priest. Instead he came to America. He had a round bald spot on his head and used to try all kinds of remedies to grow hair on it. His favorite story he used to tell his grandchildren was that when he discovered a 'hair grower' he would be rich enough to



THE "DIGGING UP ANCESTORS" CONTEST OF THE WAUKESHA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY BROUGHT TO THE COUNTY MUSEUM (LEFT TO RIGHT) CHRISTINE LACHOWIN, SUSSEX; GARY JORGENSEN, 724 ARCADIAN AVE.; CHRISTINE HARLAND, PEWAUKEE RT. 2; AND NICKI TRENHAILE, PEWAUKEE RT. 5. THEY'RE LOOKING OVER CHRISTINE LACHOWIN'S FAMILY TREE.

PHOTO FROM THE WAUKESHA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

take them all back to Ireland."

Donna continued, "Flora Yelton Hutton, my great-grandmother, was a handy and practical person. One time one of her boys bought a used car and couldn't get it going. Great-grandmother said, 'As long as you spent good money for that contraption we may as well get some good out of it.' So she got an auto repair book and got out the tools and showed the boy how to fix the car."

Donna used a separate page for each of her ancestors. One page said only this: "My great-grandfather McIntyre hawled (sic) coal with a team of mules, and that's about all I know about him."

Another page said: "My great-grandfather Andrew Hazelbaker lived to be 103 years old. He liked to tell about how he shook hands with Abraham Lincoln when he was a boy." ... "My great-grandfather John Yelton was in the Civil War. He was a nice looking man with a long white goatee and white hair. His wife died when his children were young and he raised them himself."

Marty Perkins, Mukwonago, said, "Martin Luther Walker was

my grandfather on my mother's side. I always used to call him 'Pa.' He took me downtown every day. Charles A. Perkins was my great-grandfather. His father was one of the first to have sheep around here."

Richard Dixon, Eagle, announced: "I was born near Waukesha September 11, 1950, on a rainy afternoon. I was named after my great-grandfather Richard Dixon. My great-great-grandfather Barent Diedricson was born in Norway. They came to the United States and he had his name Americanized to Bernard Dixon."

James Thompson, New Berlin, had other interesting ancestors and relatives besides old "Snow Shoe Thompson." He wrote: "Grandma Oimen died when she was 95 years old and I was only two. I cannot remember much about her, but I do remember when she rode in an airplane that landed on our farm just outside our house. This was her first and only airplane ride. ... Grandpa Storck likes to hunt and fish. He takes me with him often times and we have a good time together."

Billy Butchart who comes from a family of dentists around Waukesha, told this warm little story: "Alexander McFarlane was my great-great-grandfather. He was still living when William Alexander, my grandfather went to dental school. My grandfather would sit in the kitchen by the fireplace and pull Alexander's teeth out. He would tell William, 'You'll never make any money in that tooth business, you'd better stick to carpentry.'"

Sue Flann from Mill Valley in Muskego had a grandfather born in Oslo, Norway, who ran a saloon in this country. When he met Sue's pious grandmother, he had two strikes against him: his profession and his weight. He weighed 300 pounds. After traveling to Hot Springs and to Waukesha to take mud baths so that he could reduce, he finally satisfied Sue's grandmother and they were married.

Last summer 142 relatives attended a reunion of Sue's family "from Canada, Mexico, South America, California, Oregon, Washington, Minnesota and good old Waukesha."

Sue Flann, who has a warm loving feeling toward her family, looked back over the age of her ancestors, and concluded, "I think I will live quite long." ❑