

# 'NOJOSHING'

The official Newsletter of the St. Francis Historical Society  
Also serving Milwaukee's Old Town of Lake area

4235 South Nicholson Avenue  
St. Francis, Wisconsin 53207  
(414) 481-2300

Spring 1991

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## ST. FRANCIS HISTORICAL SOCIETY:

**WE ARE**

**"SERIOUS ABOUT NOJOSHING"**

**GENERAL MEETING — APRIL 24TH  
"WOMEN'S WORK ON THE FARM"**

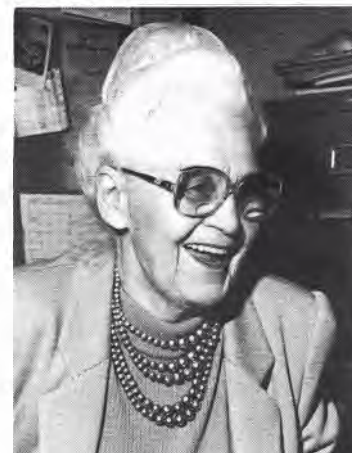


(State Historical Society of Wisconsin)

The above photograph of Martha Goetsch Buelke in her

Juneau farmyard in 1899 is one of 68 photos on a 15-panel display which is on exhibit at the St. Francis Library, 4230 South Nicholson Avenue, and will be the focus of our quarterly general meeting on Wednesday, April 24th at the library at 6:00 p.m. The meeting will take place in the library's basement meeting room, where cheese and crackers will be served along with punch. The entertainment will be provided by **Milwaukee Reflections, Ltd.**, who will present their newest program entitled, "Portraits II: Six of Our Sex," a peek into the lives of Margaret Schurz, Maria Pabst, Caroline Quarles, Grace Lusk, Gretchen Colnik and Hildegard, six Wisconsin women who had significant impact during their lifetimes. This meeting will not feature our usual potluck supper. Please take advantage of the fine displays and programs offered by **your** St. Francis Historical Society - see you there!!

## IRENE GREBE: 1901-1991



(Photo by Ralph Clark)

Irene Grebe, founder of Milwaukee's largest and best known family-owned bakery, died on January 27, 1991 after a brief illness. She was 89. She began baking out of her Town of Lake home in 1939 and, within 20 years, became the premier bakery chain in the area, becoming the first local bakery to sell to supermarkets on a wholesale basis, a tradition carried on today by her son, W. James Grebe, who survives her in addition to a daughter, Jane Rodebaugh, both of Milwaukee, 8 grandchildren and 11 great-grandchildren. Funeral services were held at Prasser-Klecicka Funeral Home in Bay View, and burial was in Arlington Park Cemetery in Greenfield. (A 1988 interview with Irene Grebe is featured elsewhere in this newsletter - Ed.)

# THE STREETS OF ST. FRANCIS

## KINNICKINNIC AND THOMPSON

By Carl Baehr

(Third of a series)

Thompson Avenue, Thompson School, and Thompson Cemetery make Thompson the most used placename in the city, aside from St. Francis itself. It was used even more in times past. Among earlier names were Thompson Corners, Thompson Station, Thompson Stables, Thompson Road and the Thompson Place.

Who was Thompson and why were these places named for him?

Jared Thompson was born in Connecticut about 1805. In 1828, then in his early 20s, he and his wife moved to Vermont where several of their eleven children were born. Nine years later, in 1837, the family migrated to Milwaukee during the city's infancy.

In 1840, Thompson bought a quarter of a square mile of land in the Town of Lake from the United States Government. This, coupled with other land purchases, made his property extend from Pennsylvania to Barland Avenues and from Bolivar to north of Howard though, of course, these streets were not then in existence. His farm came to be known as the Thompson Place.

The only thoroughfare on Thompson's property in 1840 was an Indian trail that ran from the Chicago Road to Milwaukee. The Chicago Road had been opened a few years earlier by the Federal Government to provide a route from Chicago to Green Bay. The part that runs through the city is now called Whitnall Avenue. The pathway began near what is now the intersection of Barland and Whitnall Avenues in Cudahy and extended to the Kinnickinnic River at the northern edge of Bay View along a route now covered by Nicholson and Kinnickinnic Avenues.

The trail kept to the higher ground away from swampy areas and where water from rain or melting snow would drain off quickly. It twisted and snaked while it followed the higher contours of the land, but overall was a fairly direct route toward Milwaukee. Since it was a diagonal, it was a much shorter route than our current pattern of north-south and east-west streets would be.

In the spring of 1843, the Supervisors of the Town of Lake officially decided to take advantage of the Indian path by laying a road over it. It had no formal name at that time. The other early roads that radiated from Milwaukee were known by the places that they led to; like Fond du Lac, Chicago, Green Bay, Janesville, Beloit, and Watertown. This road, however, led to the Chicago Road, and the name "Chicago Road" Road would have been awkward to say the least. Maps in the late 1850s and Town of Lake Supervisors' minutes from 1856 to 1876 show that it came to be called Thompson Road.

There were other land owners along the route like Wentworth, Bennett, and Estes. Why wasn't the road named for one of them? What was unique about Thompson that would cause his name to be given to the road? For this distinction,

he would probably have to give credit to the latest form of transportation, the railroad. In 1855, the Chicago and Milwaukee Railway began operation, and its tracks intersected the road on Thompson's land (near Denton and Nicholson). The crossing became known as Thompson Corners and the railroad station located there was called Thompson Corners Station or Thompson Station.

Thompson Corners' importance was nipped in the bud by the construction of St. Francis Seminary, which opened within a year of the railroad's first traffic. By 1867, the clergy at St. Francis Seminary were able to lobby the railroad for a station closer to them, on St. Francis Avenue. That the Thompson Corners Station, less than a mile to the south, would have to close as a result was a foregone conclusion, since there was insufficient population clustered near the crossing to sustain it.

A quarter century later the station was gone but the intersection hadn't been abandoned. Patrick Cudahy, using the most direct route from Milwaukee, had to cross the tracks at this point in order to get to the site of his packing plant. In his autobiography, Patrick Cudahy tells us, "Employed at the railroad crossing as flagman was an old German."

Cudahy's residential area was laid out east of the tracks and toward Lake Michigan. As the population grew, the need for a road east of the tracks did too. By the early 1900s, a fork in the road was created along the tracks and traffic was diverted away from the crossing and into Cudahy. In spite of this, in 1920, there was still a watchman at the post, as described in testimony given during an inquest held on an accident between a horse-drawn buggy and a 60-mile-per-hour locomotive.

Eventually, the need for a watchman was gone and, more recently, the need for the crossing itself was eliminated altogether as the result of changed traffic patterns and a concern for safety. Traffic is now routed onto Kinnickinnic from Nicholson via Denton.

In addition to having its course changed, the Thompson Road has gone through a series of name changes. Officially called the Thompson Road in the Civil War era, the route was also known as the Chicago Road. Since Whitnall Avenue was also called Chicago Road, Thompson was sometimes called New Chicago Road and Whitnall was Old Chicago Road.

The part of the road in Milwaukee and Bay View became known as Kinnickinnic because of the Kinnickinnic River it crossed. Kinnickinnic is an American Indian term which means a vegetative mixture used for smoking. It usually consisted of dried leaves and bark and sometimes included tobacco. This name for the road was accepted north of the crossing by the Town of Lake in the 1920s. The part of the road south of the crossing was changed to Nicholson Avenue in 1930.

The second Thompson Road, the one that shows on St. Francis maps today, and is now called Thompson Avenue, is only a part of its former self. This old road, which is on pre-Civil War maps, crossed Thompson's land in an east-west direction, on what is now Norwich Avenue and extended to the lake on Thompson-Howard Avenue.

This Norwich location defied the common practice of the time which was to put roads on section lines. When it was originally surveyed, Wisconsin was divided into one square mile sections and the practice was to allocate land along the borders of these sections for roads. For some reason Thompson did not develop a road on his section line, which would have been the current Howard Avenue. Perhaps the ground in this area was too soggy for a road. Early maps show that the headlands of Deer Creek, then a more significant stream, were located on the section line of his land and may have made construction of a road too difficult or too expensive. Cost estimates show it's going to be expensive to construct today as part of the Lake Arterial project.



Norwich Avenue, shown here in 1989, looking east across Pennsylvania Avenue, was originally called Thompson Road. (SFHS - Chris Barney)

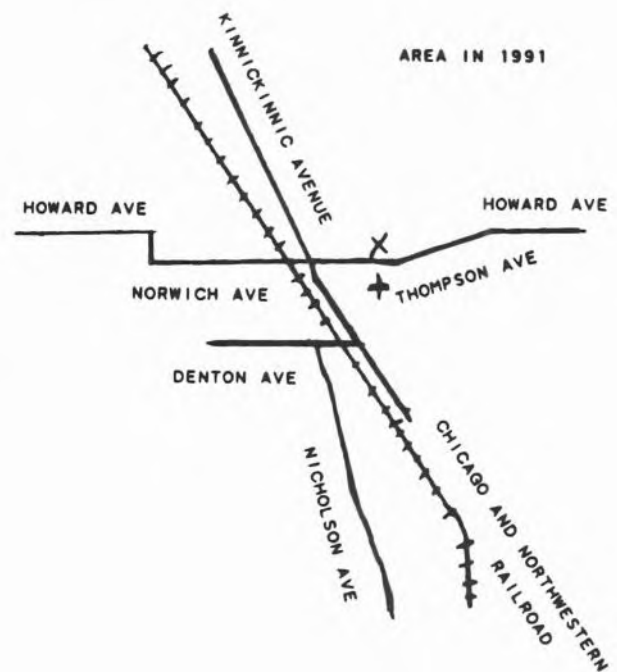
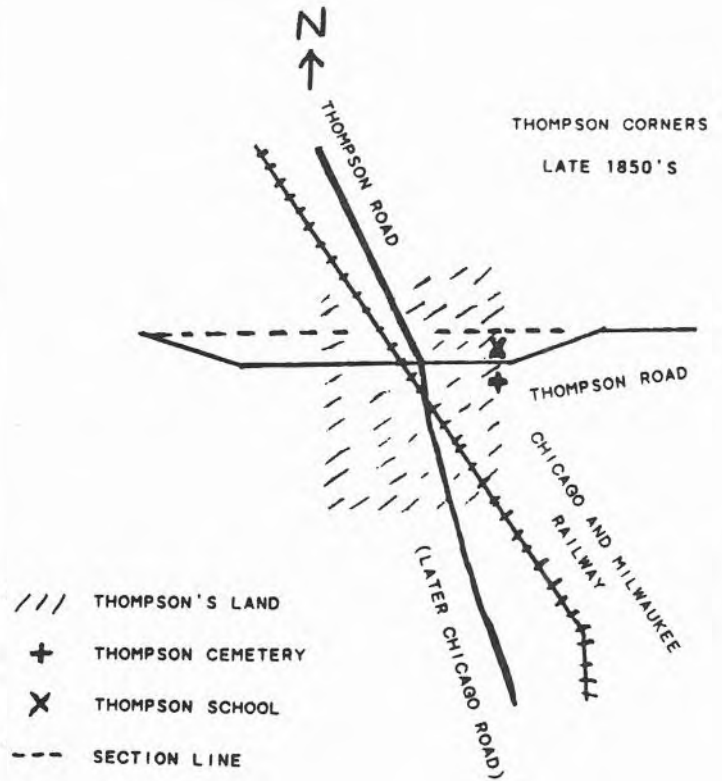
Adjacent landowners did use the section line for roads and because Thompson did not, a diagonal road was necessary to connect them. The road from his property to the lake was called Thompson Road until 1930 when it was changed to Thompson Avenue. Now only the quarter-mile diagonal portion which connects Norwich, at the Thompson School, to Howard, retains his name.

Histories of Milwaukee, census and land records, and newspaper accounts tell us that Jared Thompson had a variety of skills. During the 53 years that he lived in Milwaukee County he was a hardware store owner, preacher, farmer, politician and public servant in a number of roles.

He is credited with opening one of the first, if not the first, hardware store in Milwaukee in the late 1830's. On the 1850 census, he was listed as a farmer on his land in the Town of Lake and, in 1860, he was commended for a fine potato crop. He kept horses at the Thompson Stables and in 1861, offered a "\$50 reward for recovery of a span of horses recently stolen from his farm."

Thompson was a trustee of the first Methodist Episcopal church in Milwaukee. When there was a problem raising money to pay for a minister, he served as the congregation's preacher from 1837 to 1839. During this time he was promi-

nent in the local temperance movement, serving as an officer of the Milwaukee Temperance Society and then on the Executive Committee of the Wisconsin Temperance Society, an organization that he helped organize.



Politically he was a Whig, until the Republican Party was formed, when he ran on that party's slate. In 1842, he was elected as a supervisor for the Town of Lake and then to the state assembly a few months later. In the 1850s, he served as Chairman of the Town Board, and by virtue of that position, automatically became a Milwaukee County supervisor.

That same year, he was defeated in another bid to serve in the state assembly.

In 1855, Jared Thompson was elected as Justice of the Peace, a position which included the responsibilities of coroner. That same year, the Milwaukee Sentinel printed reports that he filed as coroner regarding bodies that had washed up on shore. There were at least four bodies recovered that summer, three of them from the wreck of the "S.S. Sebastopol." All were buried in the Lake Protestant Cemetery, the incorporated name of the Thompson Cemetery which was on land that he had donated.

During the Civil War, several years after his wife Frances died, he sold most of his land to Charles Tesch. From there, according to Milwaukee city directories, he lived in the Walker's Point area of the city. Apparently city life did not agree with him, because within a short time he moved to the Town of Oak Creek where he was elected Justice of the Peace. When he died in Oak Creek in 1890, he was described as being "a thoroughly honest upright man, and was greatly respected by all who knew him."

The same could not be said for his son and namesake, Jared Jr. (actually Jared III, the father was a Junior).

The name, Jared Thompson Jr., in the index to the Milwaukee Sentinel, located at the Milwaukee Public Library, leads to front page stories during February and March of 1858.

Jared Jr., then a 21-year-old teacher at the schoolhouse on the site of the current Thompson School, was accused of flogging one student and knocking out another student's teeth. He didn't deny either charge but responded that he hadn't knocked out the student's teeth by stomping on his face as alleged. He also denied claims that he had left indentations on Daniel Razy's face from the nails on the heel of his boots.

He proclaimed that Norman Razy deserved the beating for making a hole in his desk and that Norman's brother, Daniel, shouldn't have interfered. Jared Jr. was compelled to remove Daniel from the school by physical means and several of Daniel's teeth were lost in the process. Jared Jr., in a wordiness that may have been an indication of his future in law and politics, said, "By what process of elimination his teeth were made to disappear, I am entirely unadvised."

The jury, apparently believers in corporal punishment, acquitted Jared Jr. of the charge of "intent to maim." They may have felt that Jared Jr. was adequately punished the day after the incident, when he was beaten by friends and relatives of the Razeys before they ran off into the tamarack swamp outside of the school.

Other news stories show that Jared Jr. was involved in controversy throughout his life as a lawyer, a politician and as a political appointee. As an attorney during the Civil War, Jared Jr. was described as a "shyster" by military officers who also said that statements that he made were "utterly false." As a district attorney he was called "utterly incompetent" by the Milwaukee Sentinel. The police department expressed similar opinions. The Sentinel further said

that to call him able and honest would "provoke a smile from Barnum's hippopotamus."

Impeachment proceedings were brought against Jared Jr. while he was a court commissioner, a post he resigned. As school commissioner he accused, and then denied accusing, the Milwaukee City Treasurer of corruption and stealing.

He must have had supporters, though. In addition to being elected District Attorney, he was elected a Milwaukee alderman, even though he was termed "the most unpopular man on the Democratic ticket." He resigned this position, too. Jared Jr. died near St. Francis in 1914. Unlike his father in so many ways, Jared Jr. was laid to rest in Forest Home Cemetery, while his father was buried in Thompson Cemetery.

Others in the Thompson family were not so newsworthy. Ten years after Jared Jr.'s troubles as a school teacher, his niece, Ophelia Thompson, taught at the Thompson School, which was also a donation of Thompson Sr. She was the daughter of Hayden Thompson, Jared Jr.'s older brother, a horticulturist in St. Francis. Another brother, William, was a Civil War veteran who died in 1912 in the Town of Lake.

Jared Thompson provides several examples of how men come to have places named after them. Thompson School and Thompson Cemetery are named because of his philanthropy. Thompson Avenue, like many streets in the area, was named after the man who owned land that an early road either ran through or was adjacent to. Ownership also accounts for the names of the Thompson Place and Thompson Stables:

Thompson Corners, Thompson Station, and Thompson Road (Kinnickinnic) were probably the result of Thompson's serendipity. While he did select land that was accessible (via the Indian trail) there was no way that he could have known that a railroad line would intersect the road on his land. If St. Francis Seminary hadn't been located where it was, it is quite possible that we would still be using these terms today and that we could, in fact, be residents of the City of Thompson Corners.

\* \* \*

Thanks to Ellen Baehr for research assistance for this series of articles.

## RE-CAP OF JANUARY 28TH ANNUAL MEETING

One of the largest crowds in recent memory witnessed a marvelous "Christmas in January" Program given by **Milwaukee Reflections, Ltd.**, tracing the history of Santa Claus. The final act of the program told the story of a local Christmas favorite, **Billie the Brownie**, whose radio antics enthralled Milwaukee youngsters every Christmas season from 1931 to 1955. Prior to the program, the usual potluck supper was enjoyed, followed by the election of new board member **Ed Wagner** to a two-year term created by a vacancy, and the re-election of **Ron Tessmer**, **Diane Johnston** and **Chris Barney** to full three-year terms. Many items were discussed, including cataloging, displays, and genealogy.

## COMMITTEE REPORTS

### • TOURS AND TRIPS — RON TESSMER

A combination tour and trip is being planned for Saturday, May 11th, which would include a morning tour of the Frank Lupo and St. John's caretaker homes in St. Francis, followed by an on-your-own lunch, and concluding with an afternoon trip to Waukesha to tour that county's historical museum. The purpose of the trip is to observe how the Waukesha Society has utilized their facility. Our board has decided to extend the trip invitation to the general membership in order to encourage volunteerism due to the increased responsibility incurred by having a permanent facility. If you or anyone you know is interested in this special trip, please call **Ron Tessmer** at **744-0653**.

### • DISPLAYS — MARGE TESSMER

Our Society is interested in acquiring artifacts — uniforms, tools, letters, photographs and related items — from employees or the families of employees who formerly worked at the **Lakeside Power Plant**, which closed September 30, 1983, and has been in the process of demolition since 1986. The purpose of acquiring the artifacts is to set up a public display of the items, possibly at the **St. Francis Library**. The display will also include photos of the memorable demolition of Lakeside's landmark smokestacks in July 1988. If you or someone you know would like to loan or donate artifacts for this display, please call **Marge Tessmer** at **744-0653**. Arrangements can be made to pick up display items - let Marge know when you call - and your cooperation and interest are encouraged and appreciated. Suggestions for future displays are always encouraged!

## OUR FAMILY TIES:

*An interview with Irene Grebe, founder of the Grebe Bakeries, at the Grebe Corporate Offices, 5132-5202 West Lincoln Avenue, West Allis, on Monday, March 7, 1988*

*by Chris Barney*

The idea of an interview with "Irene," which I grew to call her during our three-year friendship, came about as a result of an outdoor photo session in which I took a couple of pictures of the first Grebe store at 215 East Bolivar Avenue, and then stopped in to chat with the current proprietor, Bill Martin, who has operated a barber shop in the cottage since 1971. He had an old pamphlet from the 1950s called "The Grebe Story," which he graciously allowed me to copy. In the text, Irene talked about the bakery's humble beginnings in the kitchen of her home at 4525 South Austin Street, Town of Lake, in 1940, which soon expanded to their front bedroom and finally into Edward Kapitzke's beer depot on Bolivar when he moved to new quarters at 3969 South Howell Avenue - still in business there today, under different management.



*Walter Grebe (right) showing off Grebe Bakeries' first revolving oven in 1941.*



*The original Grebe's "Cottage" Bakery on East Bolivar Avenue, shown here in the 1950s.*

*(Both photos courtesy Grebe's Bakeries)*

In the pamphlet, Irene described her original idea, which was "TO BAKE LIKE THE HOUSEWIFE," using the very best ingredients and methods to give the customer a delicious variety of baked goods. She also gave credit to "The Goodness of God" for her success. Reading the pamphlet fascinated me so much so that I wanted to meet this wonderful woman. It just happened one night soon after the meeting with Bill the Barber, in fall 1987, I was renting a movie at Bucky's Super Video, next to the Bay View/St. Francis Post Office on East Oklahoma Avenue, near my home, and I was talking to the cashier about the old Town of Lake. It turned out that "Bucky's" wife was Irene's granddaughter. After getting her (the granddaughter's) phone number, I called and explained my intention of doing an interview. Eventually I was able to speak to Irene, who was unable to arrange a meeting with me until after the new year because of a hip problem and her holiday activities at San Camillo, a senior living center near the Milwaukee County Zoo.

Finally a meeting was arranged. Irene's grandson, Jim Jr., picked her up, and we met at the Grebe offices in West Allis. With me was a longtime friend and co-worker, Ralph Clark, who took some wonderful photographs during the interview. As we walked from the bakery retail store to her son, Jim Sr.'s, office, she clutched my arm and talked about the difficulty of recovering from a fractured hip: "I don't get around as quick as I used to, but I can still walk - and

that's important." Once inside the office, Irene got down to business - but in a lighthearted way that left you waiting for the next story.

Irene Ingram, as she was known before her marriage to Walter Grebe - famous in his own right as a musician with the Journal and with "Heinie's Grenadiers" in the 1920s and 30s - was born April 24, 1901 and grew up in Lebanon, Nebraska, where her father ran a grocery store. She related that she learned a lot about business practices and how to deal with people from that early experience. After high school, Irene taught in a one-room schoolhouse before joining an all-girl band and touring the country, playing saxophone and piano. While on the road, she met "Wally" - also touring with a different band. Irene fondly remembers, "Wally played with the Duncan Sisters show and the Joe Thomas sextet at the Rialto in New York City. I guess I was really taken with him after he played, "What'll I Do When You're Gone Away" for me. After we were married in Greenwich, Connecticut, we continued touring for a while and then came back and moved into a furnished apartment in Wauwatosha, but Wally liked Town of Lake, so we moved there and built our home on Austin Street (in 1934). A few years later, Wally got a terrible strep infection which affected his nervous system, and he wasn't able to perform after that. That really bothered him, because he was an excellent musician - I was proud of him."

After that, Irene wanted to do something to provide extra income for the household. In 1939, she started baking goods for the Burdick School PTA. Her bread, butter horns and other bakery were so popular that friends and neighbors offered to pay her to bake them. This was the unofficial beginning of her long and successful baking career. In addition to her baking, she also assisted and coordinated the annual Burdick School Carnival. She recalled, "I was good friends with Tony Erickson, who led the Burdick Grade School Band, and I would help organize the fund raisers - we had a fortune teller one year, and another year an auction; he had prizes donated from Cudahy Packing Company and Lou Fritzel's. I remember the first year a man named Mr. Hemke said to me, 'You come from a small town, don't you?' I said, Yes, and I'm glad I did. He said, 'Well, we do things differently in the city.' I said, Well this is Town of Lake, isn't it? He still insisted our ideas for the carnival would never go over. Well, I ran the carnival for three years - the first year we raised \$500; by the third year we raised almost \$1000. We were able to buy a speaker system and band uniforms for the school out of that money. After that third year, we had a meeting of local PTA Presidents. The morning after that the Sentinel lauded me as '... one PTA President who has a different problem than all the rest - how to spend money!' They write a very nice article about me."

While baking out of her home that first year, Irene recalled how she had to improvise while baking: "I was good friends with Gene Warnimont, who was County Supervisor for Town of Lake, and I used to deliver bakery to the restaurant at the County Airport (on East Layton Avenue). When I first started baking, I would buy the used jellied beef and veal tins for two cents each from the small grocery on Bolivar near Burdick School. I would clean them and use

them to bake bread in, but the problem was that bread was supposed to be baked in one-pound loaves at that time, and with the tins I was using, my bread came out to be a pound and a quarter. The funny thing was, the health inspectors never gave me a hard time about it. I was very thankful for that, and as soon as I got into the cottage the first thing I started buying was regular bread pans!"

Irene also spoke of the very first day of business in the cottage, in early 1941: "I had a 'Bob Evans' uniform to wear on that first day - I was scared to death. I was so scared that I said the Lord's Prayer all the way to work; I said, Not my will but Thine be done, and I really meant it. I was downstairs cooking and baking from 4 a.m. until early afternoon, then I got cleaned up and into my uniform - we were only open from 2 to 6 p.m. that first day. I came upstairs and looked out and saw people lined up for a block on Bolivar Avenue, all the way to Austin. I thought, oh my God, there's been an accident on my opening day! That's when I looked a little closer and realized they were all lined up at my front steps. We totally sold out that day - I was so surprised and happy!"

Another obstacle to overcome was the onset of World War II within nine months of the bakery's opening. Irene talked about a big problem: "One of the hardest items to get was sugar. Not knowing about how to order rations, I didn't order enough at first, and then I had to plead with the ration board to get enough to keep up with business demand. I got a lot of help from different people and business acquaintances at first. Quite a few small businesses went under in the early months of the war, but the ones who stayed did a lot of business. Mr. Meurer started his bakery business about the same time as mine, and he was able to survive, too - we helped each other out."

Not long after the war ended, in March 1947, the Transport Company ended streetcar service to Bolivar Avenue, cutting back to Howard Avenue. The bus service which replaced it whisked by Irene's bakery. "I lost a lot of business when that happened," explained Irene. "I had to think of something to get my customers back, so I thought putting something attractive in my front bay windows would attract attention. Sure enough, shortly after that a bus pulled up and the driver came in and said, 'We were taking bets about what was in your window.' I said, why that's pfefferneuse - here, have a bag. Anyone else in the bus want some? I ended up selling a lot of pfefferneuse that way, but it still wasn't enough to offset the business loss, and I ended up renting the store on Howard and Howell" (at 116 West Howard Avenue).

The next generation to enter the baking field was son Jim. Having family experience in the baking field, he ended up in charge of all baking and mess duties at the Maine airbase where he was stationed while in the service in the early 1950s. By the time he returned from active duty there were several Grebe outlet stores and a number of additions to the Bolivar Avenue store, warehouse and bakery, as well as wholesale bakery sales to supermarkets. It was during this period that young Jim took over as General Manager of Production. Jim would recall in later years, "Mom went from being a baker to being a business owner."



*Irene's son, Jim, shown in front of the family home in 1940, is now Grebe Bakery president and CEO.*

*(Courtesy Grebe Bakeries)*

Still, Irene could not resist being involved in the people part of the business: "I was a happy worker," she spoke sincerely. "I really loved my work; I remember standing in the bakery late at night and saying, God, I thank you, for selling my bakery out, or for having such loyal employees. Many of them worked six or seven days a week for me and never complained, and quite a few worked for me until they died. I used to give high school students their first job. I would tell them, you're not getting top wages but you're getting something more valuable than that - work experience which will help you to be a good worker wherever you go. And I would reassure their parents that Grebe's was a good place to work, with clean surroundings and no swearing."

Irene always tried to guide her employees by example - even when she wasn't prepared to. She recalled, "I remember when we opened up our South 13th Street store. I was dressed in a suit from Lou Fritzel's, and I was wearing a corsage. There was a long line of people waiting, and they streamed in when we opened. We had bathrooms in the back that were used by workers and business people, and I wanted them to be clean for the customers. I asked one of my new girls to go clean them up. She said, 'Mrs. Grebe, you hired me to do sales work - I don't clean bathrooms.' I took off my matching black apron and handed it to the girl and I said, Here's my apron - now, you go out and greet and serve my customers, and do the job I'm doing, and you better do it, dammit! I'll clean the bathrooms! And I did. Well, all the other girls in the store saw what happened, and I never had to clean those bathrooms again! That little new girl didn't last long there, either."

Finally, dwindling business necessitated closing the



*By about 1950, when this photo was taken at the cottage bakery, Jim and his mother (at left) worked together closely in daily bakery operations.*

*(Collection of W. James Grebe)*

original cottage store on Bolivar Avenue in 1957 and in November of that year the corporate headquarters was moved to its present location in West Allis. Closing the cottage was an emotional experience for Irene: "I remember the first time I went back after it closed - I just cried and cried. The walls just echoed with the footsteps and memories of all the people I worked with there. Our work paid for every nail and board in that place." The cottage and adjoining warehouse are to this day owned by the Grebe family, with the warehouse still used for storage by the bakery.

Following his illness and retirement from performing, Walter Grebe took an active part in the bakery, and assisted in areas such as building and designing in addition to negotiating on new store rentals and purchases. Irene recalled her husband's difficulty adjusting to a secondary position in family finances: "Wally missed his music so much - I tried to get him his own music store on Howell Avenue to teach the young students, but it didn't work out. It was a big disappointment not to be playing anymore. He played solos

for the Streetcar Company Band for nine years straight, and was with the Journal Company 14 years."

After being together 41 years, her husband's unexpected passing hit Irene particularly hard. He was actually pronounced dead on the way to the hospital on Christmas Eve, 1966, and then revived. "The first thing he did after he came to was ask for a cigarette," recalled Irene. "Then he had another spell and they brought him back again. I had been busy trying to make Christmas dinner and had to stop what I was doing. I called for help with dinner after that. The next day, the family was over again, and Wally was allowed to come home. I remember Jim carrying him into the house. I don't think he was home an hour when he had another attack. He died for real that time. I knew it in the ambulance. I remember that later everyone was just sitting at home when I called from the hospital, and I told my Jim to let the grandchildren open their Christmas presents, because that's the way Grandpa (Walter) would have wanted it."

After that, Irene said she got sick for a while herself, and didn't feel quite the same after her husband's death. She recalled, "The following year, we were going to have Christmas at my house just like we always did, but at the last minute Jim called me and said, 'Mom, I just can't do it this year.', so I was left with all the Christmas decorations to look at." The old house on Austin was sold to a family friend, Jack Brownell, a few years later and a year or two after that (about 1972), she finally retired from what was supposed to have been a short-term way to make money -after 32 years of being one of the most successful bakeries in the Milwaukee area, and easily being the most recognizable face in Milwaukee baking history. Irene related, "I kind of retired grudgingly, but I guess it was about time, and my son really has a better business sense than I do."



Three generations in the Grebe bakery business (from left), son, Jim Sr.; mother, Irene; grandson, Jim Jr. at the Grebe corporate offices in 1988.

(Photo by Ralph Clark)

Since retirement, Irene has remained active in several areas, and the Grebe bakery business has thrived under the firm leadership of her son, Jim, Company President, and his son, Jim Jr., Vice President of Sales and Marketing. Employee loyalty remains high, as evidenced by 37-year employee Thomas Pelkowski, who began his Grebe career in August 1951 as a 15-year-old, part-time high school student

and is now Company Vice President, and Rosie Balistreri, who, since beginning her Grebe employ in 1974, has risen to the responsible position of Manager of Personnel and Purchasing in addition to her duties as Chief Secretary. Both say that Irene still comes by to visit and check up on bakery operations from time to time. In addition, she keeps a close eye on her daughter, Jane's, "Country Maid" salad business, which was spun off from the Grebe delicatessen branch several years ago. She remains Chairman of the Board of Grebe's Bakery, Inc., a position she has held since 1967, but in the hearts of the countless number of customers, friends, business associates, co-workers and her family, she will not be thought of primarily for her business. Rather, she will be lovingly acknowledged as a strong, yet compassionate, Christian woman from the Town of Lake, who always gave thanks to the Lord in whom she steadfastly placed her faith, and who, in turn, did her best to share that God-given goodness with all those whose lives she touched -a special goodness which has typified the Grebe baking tradition for nearly a half century.

## PROJECTS IN PROGRESS

- Our board has been thoughtfully weighing the responsibilities of possibly having to operate and/or maintain two separate facilities for storage, display and meetings -the **Frank Lupo** home and the **St. John's School for the Deaf** caretaker's home. Any input from the general membership is welcomed - call any board member if interested.
- Demolition and removal of asbestos at the **Lakeside Power Plant** site was expected to resume sometime in April, according to a news release. An Oak Creek environmental firm, **Schauer and Associates**, has gotten approval from the DNR to go ahead with its plan for asbestos abatement at the site. Demolition of the power plant, which began in 1986, was halted in 1989 when asbestos was first discovered. Most of the hazardous material is believed to be in five large boilers and two coal bins, and remaining abatement costs are expected to be more than \$300,000 according to the article.
- Our Society received a letter from the **St. Francis Veterans Memorial Committee**, asking for assistance in locating names of St. Francis' war dead in order to place them on a memorial to be built in the city. The group was formed last summer for the express purpose of building such a memorial. If any of you can contribute names or know where to look for names, please call **Richard Paradowski** at 483-6257 or **Frank Rourke** at 481-3051; your help is appreciated.

## BOARD MINUTES

- **February** - The possibility of selling ads or obtaining sponsors to defray the cost of printing our newsletter was discussed.

The 1990-91 slate of Society officers was renominated



and unanimously re-elected. They are: **Ron Tessmer, President; Diane Johnston, Vice President; Millie Schimelfenyg, Secretary; Margaret Symkowski, Treasurer**

**At a special planning meeting, the board discussed the Society's purpose, mission, goals, collection policy, and involvement of the general membership regarding these goals.**

- **April** - The fund-raising rummage sale, originally scheduled for May, was postponed until late summer or early fall due to the possibility of a May 11th tour and trip. (See **Committee Reports**).

## **"ST. FRANCIS/OLD TOWN OF LAKE AREA TRAILS"**

*by Chris Barney*

### **"MILWAUKEE'S ELECT-ROMANCE WITH THE RAILS"**

(Second of a series)

In today's world of automobiles, buses and airplanes, it is surprising to recall that it has been less than thirty years since the last electric train, two-car consist 751-760 of the Chicago, North Shore and Milwaukee Railroad (the "North Shore Line"), rolled into the Milwaukee terminal at 6th and Michigan Streets at 2:52 a.m. on Monday, January 21, 1963. That final "end of the line" call signaled the end of 73 years of electric railroad revenue passenger service in Milwaukee. In the 28 years hence, the absence of this form of transportation has caused such a multi-faceted dilemma that a serious effort is currently taking place to return electric rail transportation to southeastern Wisconsin. Here, then, is a brief look at the history of the sophisticated network of electric railroad lines which served greater Milwaukee so efficiently for so many years.



*The newly restored "Electroliner," shown at its 50th anniversary re-dedication at the Illinois Railway Museum on February 9, 1991, was a part of the North Shore Line's fleet of electric passenger trains which were the last such trains to serve Milwaukee, ending passenger service in 1963.*

*(Photo by Chris Barney)*

## **Early Street Railway History**

Prior to 1860, the transportation needs of early Milwaukee were served primarily by omnibuses - horse-drawn vehicles which ran specific routes much the same as today's motor buses and catered to passengers alighting from ships and the early steam railroads that served the city. By 1859, however, news of the success of a new transportation mode - the street railway - filtered in from the larger cities in the eastern United States. It was becoming clear that Milwaukee, a burgeoning city of nearly 50,000, was in need of a larger and more convenient form of public transit. On September 24th of that year, south side pioneer George H. Walker, in partnership with three other civic leaders, formed the River and Lakeshore City Railway Company, Milwaukee's first street railway. The company began with a capital stock of \$50,000 from which two horsecars were ordered from a Philadelphia car builder. Service began on May 30, 1860, with a five-cent fare being set (revenue that day amounted to \$38.00) with the first two cars operating north from Walker's Point (near S. Water St. and the confluence of the Menomonee and Milwaukee Rivers) approximately halfway to its intended original terminus of Division (E. Juneau) Street. The enthusiastic response prompted the **Milwaukee Sentinel** to comment the following day that "The horse railway is bound to be a popular institution." In time, street railways served most areas of the city, and omnibus operations eventually died out. Other routes which served the city were the Milwaukee City Railway Company, on the west side and, later, a portion of the near south side; the West Side Street Railway Company, which extended on its Wells Street line to what was then the western city limits, at 34th Street; and the Cream City Railroad Company which, in addition to covering many of the same east side and near south side streets as the old River and Lakeshore line, also later served the Village of Bay View, extending its tracks along Kinnickinnic and Russell Avenues to serve the plant of the North Chicago Rolling Mills - later known as the Illinois Steel Company.

With the introduction of electricity as a viable power source following Thomas Edison's incandescent lamp invention in 1879, it proved only a matter of a short time before the new discovery would be utilized in other forms - one of which would include the electrification of street railways. As was expected, electric streetcars were tested and proved reliable enough out east before the system was considered here.

## **The Steam Dummy Lines**

In the decade and a half prior to electrification, steam propulsion was used to reach outlying areas of the city and some suburban areas. The first of these was the Forest Home Railroad Company - from a connection with a Bay View horsecar at Clinton (S. 1st) and Mitchell Streets, the steam 'dummies' pulled trailing cars west on Mitchell and then southwest on Janesville Road to Forest Home Cemetery at Lincoln Avenue, then the city's border with the Town of Lake. The dummy line operated from 1875 until 1879, when Cream City purchased the line and converted it to horse-drawn cars. Two other dummy lines served the suburbs of Whitefish Bay and Wauwatosa. The best known

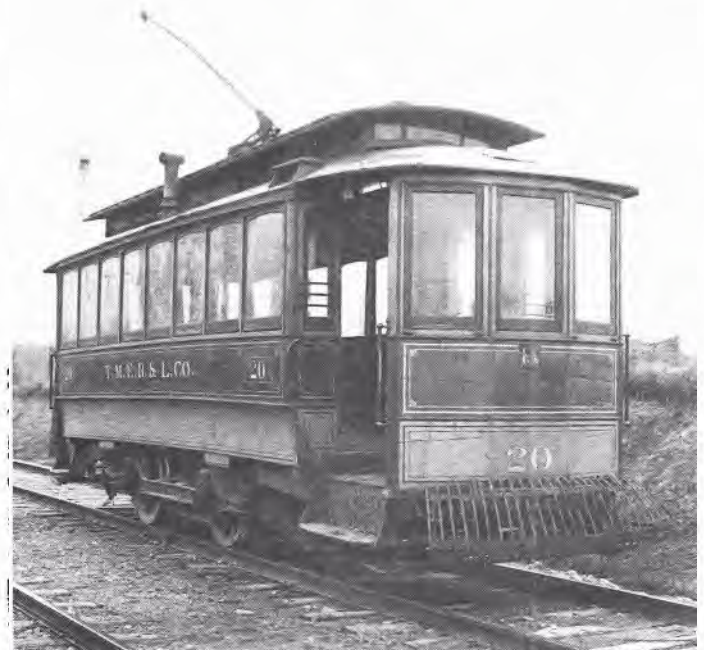
of these was the Milwaukee and Whitefish Bay Railway Company. The line began at Farwell and North Avenues, where it connected with a Cream City line, and proceeded north on Farwell and Downer Avenues to a private right-of-way which proceeded northwest to the then popular Whitefish Bay Resort. The line operated from 1887 to 1894 when it was merged into the Milwaukee Street Railway Company, and still later into The Milwaukee Electric Railway & Light Company (TMER&L Co.). The northern portion of this line eventually became the Route 15 Oakland Avenue streetcar line. The Milwaukee and Wauwatosa Motor Railway Company operated its steam dummy for only five years (1892 - 1897), but left its mark on urban streetcar operations by constructing the famous Wells Street viaduct across the Menomonee River and Miller Valley in 1892, with steam service (three dummies and six trailers) beginning on September 1st of that year. From a carbarn built at 36th and Wells, the line proceeded west across the viaduct and continued on Wells to 60th (now 68th) Street, then turned north for approximately a half mile before turning west and running parallel to the Milwaukee Road tracks before reaching its western terminus near the present day intersection of State Street and Harwood Avenue. The following year, 1893, saw the Motor Railway branch south from 44th (now 52nd) and Wells to Calvary Cemetery, then west to the new State Fair Grounds in North Greenfield (now part of the City of West Allis). Following the financial collapse of the railway in December 1897, it was absorbed by the Milwaukee Light, Heat and Traction Company (MLH&T), TMER&L's suburban operation, and was electrified a year later, serving an additional 60 years as the Route 10 Wells - Wauwatosa and Wells - West Allis Car Lines - the last city streetcar route in Milwaukee.

### The Birth of an Electrified Empire

The story of TMER&L begins with the creation by German-born immigrant Henry Villard, in 1890, of a public utility holding company called North American. Villard who, with Thomas Edison, had two years earlier consolidated all of Edison's manufacturing companies into the giant Edison General Electric Company (part of which evolved into the present-day General Electric), in 1889 created and organized the Edison Illuminating Company of Milwaukee. His goal was to consolidate the competing electric companies in the city - and also to buy out and merge the city's horsecar lines, and subsequently electrify them. To do this, he solicited the help of some prominent Milwaukee citizens, one of which was Henry Clay Payne, who would figure prominently in the initial formation of TMER&L. His faith in the feasibility of interurban travel paved the way for future developments of the "Milwaukee Electric Lines" which eventually criss-crossed southeastern Wisconsin. Ultimately, Henry Villard's plan to turn North American into a utility giant would be short-circuited by the financial panic that gripped the country in the early to mid-1890s. Ultimately, all that would be retained was the electric power and streetcar system in Milwaukee. Payne assisted with combining the various street railways that became the Milwaukee Street Railway Company in 1890. However, it was a streetcar line not controlled by North American - the Wells-Wisconsin line of the West Side Railway Company

-which made the first successful electrified streetcar run on April 3, 1890, traversing the route between the Chicago and North Western Depot at the foot of Wisconsin Street (E. Wisconsin Avenue) and the city limits at 34th and Wells. Within two years, six city railway companies operated a total of 16 routes, many of them electrified, within the city and a few suburbs. Meanwhile, North American, trying to protect its Milwaukee interests, set about absorbing the competing railway companies while selling off its interests elsewhere in an attempt to remain solvent. By 1894, with the acquisition of the Milwaukee Electric Street Railway Company, all city streetcar routes were under the ownership of North American's traction subsidiary. Electrification of the entire city streetcar system also occurred that year.

The blow that finally scuttled North American and forced its reorganization was double-barreled. First, streetcars obtained from the various smaller streetcar companies which had been absorbed were manufactured by no less than twelve different streetcar builders. This made maintenance extremely expensive and eventually made many of the cars inoperable. The subsequent need to buy new equipment created the second major financial problem, that of having to borrow a substantial amount of capital to make the streetcar purchases, which resulted in a tremendous amount being paid out in interest. Other losses included a \$135,000 fire at the Kinnickinnic car barns on December 28, 1892, in which several streetcars were lost and, perhaps, the final straw being the large damage claims resulting from the accident on February 4, 1895 in which Car 145 plunged into the Kinnickinnic River after an apparently inattentive bridge tender opened the bridge to let a vessel pass. Three deaths and five injuries resulted, after which North American attempted to market some of its street railway bonds, which resulted in a return of only 40 cents on the dollar. Their trac-



*An example of the many different kinds of rolling stock TMER&L inherited from its predecessor company, MSRY. Co., Brownell-built car #20, built in 1893, is shown here in Waukesha stub service about 1900. The car was scrapped in 1911.*

*(TMER&L photo from the Wietzke collection, courtesy of Dave Stanley.)*

tion properties failed to provide enough revenue to pay even the interest on their outstanding debts, so North American was finally forced into receivership. The internal reorganization produced The Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Company.

On January 29, 1896, the Milwaukee Street Railway (MSRy) was foreclosed upon, TMER&L was incorporated the same day, North American became solely a utility holding company and on February 1, 1896, deeded the Milwaukee electric and railway properties to TMER&L. Henry Payne, in concert with John I. Beggs, who had helped to organize the first electrified streetcar line in Appleton through his Wisconsin Traction, Light, Heat & Power Company, planned to develop Milwaukee's extensive interurban network when they formed the Milwaukee Light, Heat and Traction Company, a wholly-owned subsidiary of TMER&L. This gave TM the authority to build and hold title to traction properties which were located outside the City of Milwaukee. The first few years of the new company were to be fraught with difficulties that threatened the very existence of TMER&L, and will be discussed, along with the rise of the North Shore Line, in the next installment of this series on Milwaukee's streetcar and interurban era.

(The information in this article was taken from CERA Bulletin 112, entitled "TM - The Milwaukee Electric Railway and Light Company," by Joseph M. Canfield. This book is available at the Milwaukee Public Library - Ed.)

## FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

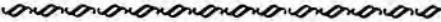
Volunteerism - what a concept. When people step forward and set aside several hours each month to accomplish goals for a worthy cause, their efforts are publicly applauded as well they should be. Many people benefit from the work of these devoted volunteers. However, when goals change and responsibilities increase, the burden placed upon the volunteers can often diminish their desire to continue in such a capacity, creating an even greater burden on the remaining volunteers, reducing the chance of achieving the desired goals of the worthy cause.

This scenario could apply to any number of not-for- and non-profit educational organizations but I am, of course, referring to our own St. Francis Historical Society. Our Society is at a crossroads right now, with the opportunity to potentially utilize two display, storage and meeting facilities in the very near future. Coupled with that opportunity, however, is an ongoing problem - lack of volunteers.

It is obvious that the use of either or both of the facilities for which our Society is negotiating require contractual obligations on our part for the use and care of these facilities. But, with the ongoing duties and responsibilities already being shouldered by the "inner circle" of board and general members, Society directors are realistically looking at just how much additional responsibility this "inner circle" can stand. The possibility of withdrawing our request to utilize one of the facilities is seriously being considered - and that's a shame.

Many people fear volunteerism because they think they'll be locked into it or expected to become a "regular" - not so. As little time as an hour a month, or a half-day every few months would be an enormous benefit to us. Even being an "on-call" volunteer would assist in a huge way - all that means is we could call if a project came up, and if you've got time that's great - if not, thanks anyway and maybe next time. Just to have a roster of potential members to call would improve our position in a dramatic way. Projects like filing historic photos and papers; tagging and cataloging historic artifacts; serving food, setting up displays or running a booth at the annual craft fair or St. Francis Days. It can be great fun, and it's a great way to meet your neighbors and other Society members.

Don't be afraid of volunteerism - it doesn't have to take up much of your time and you stand a real chance of having a good time. Do be afraid of complacency, however, it might mean the difference between our Society doing well and our undoing.



## SOMETHING TO SMILE ABOUT . . .

*If you teach your child how to love, you have taught him how to live.*



## HISTORY AROUND US

- The **Hawks Inn Historical Society** will be presenting a Quilt Show on **June 7th and 8th** at the St. John's Military Academy Field House in Delafield, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. each day. Admission is \$2.50, and the show will feature over 200 old and new quilts in addition to the sale of quilting and crafting supplies. There will also be a luncheon buffet served in the old Academy Dining Hall. Parking is free, and further information and directions can be obtained by writing the **Hawk's Inn, P.O. Box 104, Delafield, WI 53018**, or by calling (414) 646-2140. Hawks Inn, built in 1846, is a county, state and national landmark and is open for public tours on Sundays from 1 - 4 p.m. between May and October. Tours are \$2.00 for adults and 50 cents for children under 12.
- The annual statewide **Historic Preservation Conference** will be held on Friday and Saturday, **May 3 - 4** at the Radisson Hotel La Crosse in **La Crosse**. The Conference is entitled "**Preservation 91: Celebrating Preservation**," and will include three workshop series, several guest speakers, an award presentation, meetings, bus tours, and a boat cruise on the Mississippi River. The conference is open to all those interested, and information is available by calling Larry Reed at **(608) 262-4771**.

# SFHS MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

- I wish to play an active role in developing the St. Francis Historical Society.
- I would like to donate material to the Society.
- I would like to serve on the Board of Directors and/or committee chairman.

### ANNUAL DUES

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Individual .....\$ 4.00 | <input type="checkbox"/> Life.....\$100.00      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Family ..... 5.00       | <input type="checkbox"/> Corporate ..... 100.00 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sustaining ..... 15.00  |   |

Return to: Ronald Tessmer, 2517 E. Norwich Avenue, St. Francis, WI 53207.

## 1991 DATES TO REMEMBER

- April 24th** ..... General Membership Meeting  
6:00 p.m., St. Francis Community Center  
4230 S. Nicholson Avenue  
Exhibit: "Women's Work on the Farm";  
Program, Milwaukee Reflections,  
"Portraits II: Six of Our Sex"
- May 5, June 2** ..... Board Meetings  
2:00 p.m., Thompson School
- July 3** ..... Board Meeting  
6:30 p.m., Thompson School  
(Board meetings are open to the  
general membership.)
- July 29** ..... General Membership Meeting  
and Potluck Supper, time and place  
to be announced.  
Program: "Speedrail - Milwaukee's  
Last Rapid Transit?" by Larry Sakar,  
The Milwaukee Electric Railway &  
Transport Historical Society.

Newsletter  
St. Francis Historical Society  
4235 S. Nicholson Avenue  
St. Francis, WI 53207

