

NOJOSHING

Indian word for "straight tongue"

Land protrudes out into Lake Michigan like a straight tongue

The Newsletter of the St. Francis Historical Society

April 2014



St. Francis
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

2014-2015 Newly Elected Officers

President.....Bill Dreyfal
Vice-President.....Anna Passante
Secretary.....Stephanie Maxwell
Treasurer.....Carol Wojtecki

Board of Directors

Terry Duffey
Barbara Janiszewski
Sister Ceil Struck
Dennis Wojtecki
CoryAnn St. Marie-Carls

Honorary

Lois Neubauer
Richard Raatz
Jim Goodwin
Maggie Luczywko

Newsletter

Anna Passante
Barbara Janiszewski

MILTON VRETENAR, MAYOR OF THE CITY OF ST. FRANCIS FOR 26 YEARS

1928-2013

Milton Vretenar didn't want to come to America. What 9-year-old boy would want to leave his playmates, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins to travel across the world to an unfamiliar place where you couldn't even speak a word of the language? Surely, life was hard in their small rural village in the foothills of the Tatra Mountains in southern Czechoslovakia, but it was home. His mother had to wash their clothes on rocks in the river and gather firewood from the government-owned forest in order to have fuel for cooking and heating. Their diet was simple--potatoes were their mainstay. Milo pleaded to stay in their homeland. But as the saying goes "Father knows best," so Milt had to accept his father's decision to immigrate to a land of greater opportunity.

Years later, Milton (his christened name was Milo) recalled the Statue of Liberty greeting the family on their arrival at Ellis Island in June of 1937. He

remembered uttering the Czechoslovakian word for big--Velike! Velike! He had never seen such a huge statue!

In a 1986 newspaper interview, Milt spoke about the cultural shock he experienced when arriving in St. Francis. "It's hard to describe, because I was amazed at what I saw. I tell my kids everything was done by wagon in the little village we lived in."

Milt came to America in 1937, but his parents, John and Amelia, had originally settled in St. Francis in 1926. At that time they had only one child, John, Jr. Unfortunately, in 1927, Amelia had to return to Czechoslovakia, taking her son John with her to care for her ill mother-in-law. At the time, Amelia was seven months pregnant with Milt. With the money her husband sent from America, Amelia survived the four years of their separation. In 1931, John returned to Czechoslovakia and within a year their third child Ludwig "Ludo" was born. Having saved money in America, the family could afford to build a new home in Czechoslovakia. But soon after financial trouble resulted in John leaving his family behind and returning to St. Francis, Wisconsin, to earn more money, .

In 1937, as the political turmoil in Europe grew more volatile, John decided to send for his family. John was 11, Milo "Milt" 9, and Ludo 6. During the immigration examination in Czechoslovakia, Milt failed the medical exam, due to a minor problem. An operation was performed and the family's visa was finally granted. A small boat delivered the family to a Cunard ocean liner off the coast of France. The boys were scared of the big wide ocean and reportedly all three got seasick. The family stayed in a dormitory-like cabin, experiencing little privacy. They arrived in New York a week later.

The family lived in St. Francis in the old Peter Mueller home at 4222 South Packard Avenue. It was built in the 1870s and is one of the oldest existing homes in St. Francis. There were very few neighboring homes, according to Milt--only the Kucik, Weinhold, and Dirksmeyer families. Their house had no indoor plumbing. An outdoor well-pump provided water and the family used an outhouse. Black Bear Soda was next

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door and provided electricity. According to Milt, they actually had it better in Europe. Shortly after their arrival, around 1939, Milt's sister Amelia "Emily" was born.

The family farmed the land and kept cows. During his lunch hour Milt had to dash home from high school to water the cows. He remembered taking the cows to the Vijorick's farm at the corner of Layton and Whitnall avenues for breeding with the Vijorick's bull. "Right where Hardee's is that's where we used to take the cow on hook," said Milt. He attended Thompson School, but being a non-English speaker, the other students poked fun at him. To save his son from the bullies, his father paid tuition to Lincoln Elementary in Cudahy, a few blocks south of their home. It had been a hard transition, from old country to new, but in the end Milt was glad that his parents had insisted that they immigrate.

In 1949, Milt's dad, John, founded the John Vretenar & Sons construction company. Milt built a home for his family next to his family home on Packard Avenue. He took over the company in 1965 after his father retired.

Milt was instrumental, along with others, in the incorporation of St. Francis as a city. He got into politics when he decided to push for "some sidewalks so my kids would have a way to get to school." He was served as alderman for two years and was elected mayor in 1974, serving for 26 years. During his tenure, he oversaw construction of the public library, the revamping of Howard Avenue, and the Lake Parkway, among other projects. The city park was named for him--Milt Vretenar Municipal Park.

Milt died October 13, 2013, at age 85. He is survived by his wife, Elizabeth, son Craig, daughter Jill Doran, brother Ludwig, sister Emily, three grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. Son Craig is the building inspector for the City of St. Francis.



Milt Vretenar



Photo taken shortly before immigration
Left to right: John, mother Amelia, Milt and Ludo



Milt Vretenar's childhood home originally built by Peter Mueller in the 1870s.

What's New?

New Members

Welcome to new members, P. J. Early, Ann Howell, and Ruhamah Bauman.

A special thanks to retiring board members, Mary Drefahl, Kathy Matthew and Lois Neubauer. They were instrumental in keeping the society thriving for many years.

Update on Civic Center display cases

Catral Doyle Creative will be designing the Historical Society display cases for the Rotunda in the new Civic Center. A number of Society members are working with Catral to make the display cases spectacular.

Webpage

Dennis Wojtecki and Randy Borland are designing the new webpage.

Newsletter change

The newsletter will now be published quarterly. The schedule is March, June, July, and December. The June issue will begin this publication change.

Would you like to have the newsletter sent by email instead of snail mail? Contact us.
st.francishistoricalsociety@gmail.com

New Logo

Did you see our new logo on page one? It was designed for us by Lisa Heideman, the Creative Director of Studio 3 Art and Design, LLC. The tree represents the Austrian Pine that once stood on the present site of Stark Investments on the lakeshore. Some call it the Cupertino tree.

Board meetings

Board meetings are held on the third Saturday of the month from 10 am to noon at the St. Francis Library. All welcome.

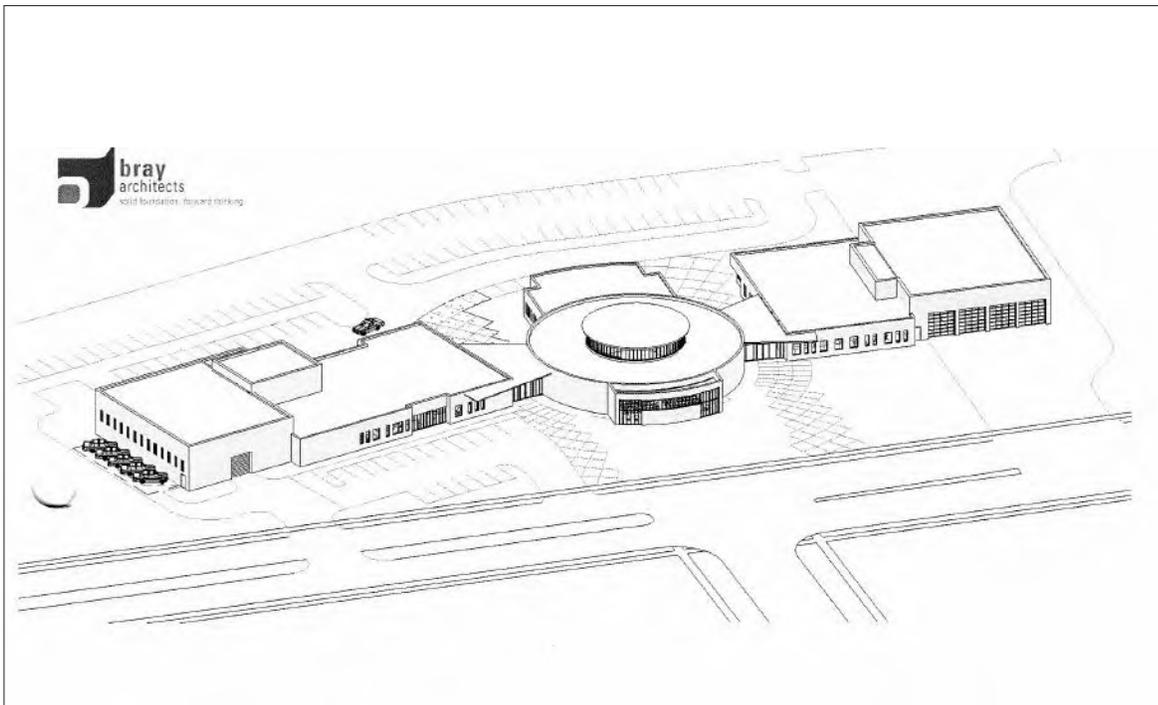
The Story of the Land

On Sunday, October 27, 2013, ground was broken for the new St. Francis Civic Center on Howard Avenue at the north end of Lipton Avenue, just west of the Community Center. The new facility will house the city offices, the police department, the fire department, the health department, and the St. Francis Historical Society. The Historical Society will have display cases in the rotunda and both a workroom and storage room. Fall 2014 is the expected completion date.

The St. Francis Civic Center building site has been home to a number of different dwellers. The first inhabitants of the area were various Indian tribes, but it is thought that the majority was the Potawatomi. The thickly wooded area, high along the nearby lake bluff (present site of Bay View Park), was once an Indian summer camp, most likely inhabited by the Deer Creek Indians. In the 1830s the US Government and the Indian tribes signed treaties, which moved the Indians further west onto reservations. In February 1839 the US Government began selling land in Town of Lake to settlers.

Thomas Brock claimed the land in 1836 and during the government land sale of February 1839 purchased 172 acres for \$1.25 per acre. That same year Brock sold land to Samuel Sexton. In 1852 and 1853 Sexton sold a total of 40 acres to William Putney. In 1862 and 1864, William Putney sold a total of 40 acres to John F. Koenig. John Koenig farmed this land the longest. His farmhouse still stands at 3849 South Packard Avenue just north of Howard Avenue. The house was built of cream city brick but was later covered in stucco.

In 1917 and 1923 the Wisconsin General Railway purchased the Koenig farm property. In turn, the Wisconsin General Railway sold the property to the Wisconsin Electric Power Company. Now this land will be the home of the new St. Francis Civic Center of which your historical society will be a proud part.



New City of St. Francis Civic Center

Police Department on the left, City Administration and Historical Society in the center, Fire Department on the right

St. Francis Historical Society
4235 S. Nicholson Avenue
St. Francis, WI 53235



Membership Form

Do you need to pay your dues for 2014? Do you want to join the St. Francis Historical Society?

Clip and mail this membership form to:

St. Francis Historical Society c/o Barbara Janiszewski 4007 S. Lipton Avenue, St. Francis, WI 53235

Name _____

Address _____

City, State, Zip _____

Telephone # _____

Email _____

Checks payable to St. Francis Historical Society. Membership runs Jan. 1 to Dec. 31.

Questions? Email us: st.francishistoricalsociety@gmail.com

Would you like to have the newsletter sent by email? Contact us.

st.francishistoricalsociety@gmail.com