



St. Francis HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NOJOSHING

Indian word for "straight tongue"

Land protrudes out into Lake Michigan like a straight tongue

The Newsletter of the St. Francis Historical Society

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March 2017

Meet Your Two New Board Members

by Barbara Janiszewski

Jennifer Mertz

It's the tale of two cities, both known by the same name. Well, almost. Jennifer was born in Portland, Oregon, and lived in Milwaukie, Oregon, until the age of sixteen when her family moved to Wisconsin, settling in another Milwaukee. (Milwaukie, Oregon, was settled in 1847 by a former Milwaukie, Wisconsin, resident, Lot Witcomb. In the 1840s, Milwaukee was spelling the town name "ie" instead of "ee".) Jennifer graduated from Whitnall High School, after which she attended the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where she met her husband, Jack. They married in 1970 and lived in Rhode Island and Ohio before returning to Wisconsin in 1975. They have lived in St. Francis since 1977. Their three children attended St. Francis schools from kindergarten through high school.

Jennifer retired in 2008 after fifteen years as a paraprofessional with the St. Francis school district. In retirement she is enjoying time with her family, especially her three grandchildren.

Her interests and hobbies include camping, hiking, reading, sewing, knitting, and art work. Volunteer activities are important to her, and she enjoys helping with church projects and providing classroom help at Willow Glen. She is on the St. Francis



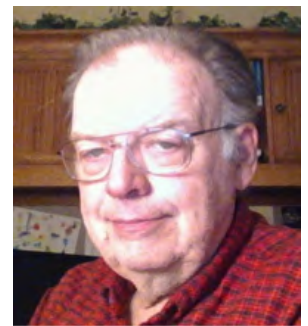
Library board and is looking forward to helping with the ongoing projects being planned by the historical society.

Jay Wesner

In 1953, when he was five years old, Jay's parents bought their first home, a modest two-bedroom ranch in St. Francis in the Harbor View subdivision. That fall, he started school as a kindergartener at Thompson School. In September of 1962, he started high school at the brand new St. Francis High School. His freshman class was the first to attend all four years at the school. He continued his education at UWM where he received a bachelor's degree from the School of Fine Arts.

His first job was as a layout artist for a publishing company in Milwaukee, but it lacked the creativity he wanted. He then drifted between a variety of jobs until he discovered quality control in the manufacturing field that offered a steady income with benefits. In 2009, the company that he had worked at for twenty-nine years closed their doors for good. With the bad economy and the difficulty of finding another good paying job, he decided it was time to retire.

He married his wife, Susan, a graduate of St. Mary's Academy, and they have one daughter and two grandsons who live in Chicago. He and his wife built their home in Franklin about twenty years ago.



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Mystery photos from the archives

Can you help us identify these people? Let us know. st.francishistoricalsociety@gmail.com

Phone: 414-316-4391



Historical Society Display Cabinet:

Thank you to Bob Zingara for the generous gift of \$5,000 to purchase a new display cabinet for the civic center rotunda. The cabinet will be for revolving displays. It is on casters so it can be easily moved from the middle of the rotunda during events. Bob graciously donated to the historical society his father's WWII army cavalry uniform. Stop by to view the display of the uniform.



Fire Destroys St. John's School for the Deaf

by Anna Passante

Nestled in a grove of trees at the top of a circular drive, the building at 3680 South Kinnickinnic Avenue is still fondly remembered by many residents as St. John's School for the Deaf. From 1876 to 1983, St. John's dedicated itself to the education of deaf children.

St. John's School for the Deaf was established on May 10, 1876, in the old Pio Nono College building that once graced the site of present-day St. Thomas More High School.¹ In 1879, St. John's moved into its own building, a new two story cream city brick structure, just south of Pio Nono.

Basic reading, writing, and arithmetic, as well as industrial arts classes for boys and home economics for girls, made up the curriculum. Staffed by Sisters of the St. Francis of Assisi order, speech and lip-reading were stressed along with manual signs and finger spelling. Most students lived at the school during the school year, returning home for holidays and summer vacation, but some students resided at the school year round. Tuition was set at twelve dollars a month, but since half the school population could not afford to pay, it was necessary for the school to raise money. Constructing church furniture in their industrial arts classes brought in greatly needed funds. In 1889, the students produced \$30,000 worth of furniture.

The school grounds were quite picturesque. A little man-made lake had small islands with rustic bridges connecting them. A large cage, housing a variety of animals, was placed in the center of the lawn. Through the wire cage, the deaf children fed the animals grass, leaves, and nuts that were gathered from the nearby woods.

Sadly, tragedy struck on July 31, 1907, when a fire broke out in the attic. The fire was reportedly caused by "spontaneous combustion." According to a report in the *Evening Wisconsin*, someone noticed smoke coming from the south roof near a chimney at 3:45 p.m. Luckily, there were fewer students on campus than usual. "Usually, we have seventy-five inmates, a great portion of whom are on their vacations," said Reverend Stephen Klopfer, the vice-president of the school. "The younger children had been dismissed for the day. Only a few of the larger girls were in the building when the fire started."

Firemen accessed water from the man-made lake. When the lake was pumped dry and gravel and mud began to clog the fire hoses, the firemen resorted to taking water directly from the nearby artesian well. The firemen fought bravely, trying to save the school. Four firemen were nearly killed when the wall of the chapel collapsed and narrowly missed them.



Drawing of St. John's School for the Deaf at the time of the 1907 fire. The original section is from 1879 and the chapel at the right was added in 1893.

Although no students were injured in the blaze, one missing student caused anxiety for the sisters. A boy, who had arrived at the school only two weeks before the fire, couldn't be located. After a frantic search, he was found battling the blaze with a chemical fire extinguisher "fighting the fire like a demon."

The entire south wing was destroyed, and the other three wings sustained substantial fire or water damage, with only the west wing, which was part of the original 1878 structure, remaining. Sadly, the chapel was completely destroyed, but fortunately the volunteers had saved much of its contents. The monetary loss to the building was \$30,000. Fire insurance covered about \$25,000.

Thankfully, no students or faculty were injured, but there was one fatality. Firemen found a pet parrot in the basement dining room, lying dead in the bottom of his cage. The bird had been singed by fire and according to firemen probably "suffocated." One can only surmise that there was a ceremonial burial by the students for a pet that once gave joy to the student residents of St. John's for the Deaf, especially during mealtimes.

The school was rebuilt within a year. Father Gerend, the school director, envisioned a building resembling the red-tiled roofed monasteries of Italy, and he hired the architectural firm of Brust & Philipp

¹ The old Pio Nono building was replaced by the present-day, red brick building that faces Kinnickinnic Avenue.

(Peter Brust and Richard Philipp) to design it. The Mediterranean style building was built on the same site. Bricks were recycled from the old building, and students helped in constructing the building.

By the early 1960s, the 1908 school building needed to be replaced. It was now considered a firetrap, and with an enrollment of 161, it was deemed too small for the deaf program. The architectural firm of Brust & Brust (the sons of architect Peter Brust) was hired to design a new 3 million dollar complex. In 1965, construction of the elementary school began and was completed in October 1966. The high school section was completed in fall 1967. The new elementary school had 10 classrooms, 6 dormitories, 3 playrooms, a library, laundry, kitchen, dining rooms, chapel, and offices and living quarters for the full-time staff.

As the school entered the 1980s there were insurmountable financial problems. The mainstreaming of deaf children into regular school classroom contributed to the decline in enrollment. For over 107 years, the school lived on a shoestring budget, but by 1983 the school could no longer hang on and was forced to close. Students were transferred to the Wisconsin School for the Deaf in Delavan, Wisconsin. The Milwaukee Archdiocese used the school building for various purposes between 1983 and 1992. In the fall of 1992, St. Francis School District purchased the St. John's building and opened Deer Creek Elementary School.

For a while, three remnants of St. John's for the Deaf remained: a worn concrete pillar that stood sentry at the base of the circular drive, a stencil on the gymnasium floor that read "St. John's," and stained glass windows in the former chapel. But the concrete pillar and the gym floor too are now gone. However, the stained glass windows in the former chapel were saved. The chapel is now used as the school library.



The rebuilt St. John's School for the Deaf 1908.



Photos of the school after the 1907 fire



Three Historic St. Francis Railroad Overpasses Are a Thing of the Past

by Anna Passante

There are currently three railroad overpasses in St. Francis: the Howard, Bolivar, and Whitnall bridges. But many residents remember three old wooden railroad overpasses---the Tripoli, Norwich, and Leroy bridges. These were removed when Lake Parkway, aka Highway 794, was constructed. Lake Parkway, officially called the John R. Plewa Memorial Lake Parkway, was completed in fall 1999. The three old bridges were removed because they did not meet the load weight required by the State.

In a 1997 *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* (MJS) article, Milwaukee resident and model railroad enthusiast, Scott Enk, said that all three bridges were built in the “camel-backed” or “hump-backed” style commonly used by the railroads in the early part of the twentieth century. The bridges were originally owned by the Chicago & North Western Railway but were sold to the Union Pacific Railroad in the early to mid-1990s. Enk was able to trace the Tripoli Bridge to 1905 and the Norwich Bridge to 1929. Enk figured the Leroy Bridge was also built in 1905.

The wooden bridges were later covered with asphalt, but the originally timber remained as its structure. Scott Piefer of Zenith Tech, the company hired to remove the bridges, claimed in the MJS article that the bridge timbers indicated that all the bridges had been “on fire at one time or another in their storied past.”

Concerned about the razing of the Norwich Bridge, the St. Francis Historical Society sought ways to save the bridge and perhaps move it to another location. In 1990, Scott Enk related to the Society information provided by Mike Gonia of the Department of Transportation. Enk said the following in a letter to the Society:

Given the bridge’s construction and current legal requirements, [Gonia said] it would be virtually impossible to rebuild it over Lake Drive. As far as placing it elsewhere (such as a park) goes, [Gonia said] that anyone who assumed ownership of the bridge would need to consider the question of potential liability and other legal considerations arising from possible problems regarding the bridge’s structural soundness and design, [and] the possibly of someone being injured by splinters from brittle timbers, and the like.

The bridges may have been lost to history, but many residents still have memories of the old bridges. The *Reminder Enterprise* (November 1995) related stories about people driving too fast over the Norwich Bridge. In that article, former City Attorney Richard Staats tells the story about one woman in the late 1960s who learned the hard way that you have to drive slowly over the bridge. She lost control of her car, and when the



East Norwich Avenue Bridge

fire department arrived they found the car teetering over the edge of the bridge. It took a while but the woman was eventually pulled out of her car, and the firefighters were able to pull the car off the edge of the bridge. In the *Reminder* article, Alderperson John Vugrinovich related another time when a motorcycle caught air off the bridge and landed on top of a car that was stopped at the stop sign on the other side. Luckily, the motorcyclist survived.

The *MJS* article mentions the nickname "Suicide Bridge" given to the Norwich Bridge. "When taken from west to east at just the wrong speed, could make a 1970s Plymouth station wagon do a fair impression of the General Lee on 'Dukes of Hazzard.'" At one time, a railroad car blew up under the Leroy Bridge and set the bridge on fire for second or possibly third time, reported the article.

Tom Jost, who lived on Leroy Avenue, recalled that the Leroy Bridge was a place for young people to gather for late-night parties. "It was just a place where they felt safe if they were drinking or whatever," said Jost. "They figured, who'd get caught under the bridge?" Jost admitted that he was one of those people who took the bridge too fast. "I think it was kind of like a rite of passage for kids in St. Francis...The first time it was kind of fun, but the second time the car didn't sound quite right, so I stopped."

There was one other bridge that experienced the same fate as these three bridges. It was the Layton Avenue Bridge. Built in 1930, it was razed and replaced in 1984. According to an article in the *Reminder* newspaper, the new Layton Avenue Bridge cost \$2.6 million. The federal government funded eighty percent of the cost, with the surrounding communities of Milwaukee, Cudahy, and St. Francis funding the remaining cost at ten percent each.

The historical society posted on Facebook a request for photos of the three bridges. The request resulted in present and former residents sharing their memories about the bridge. Here are a few of them.

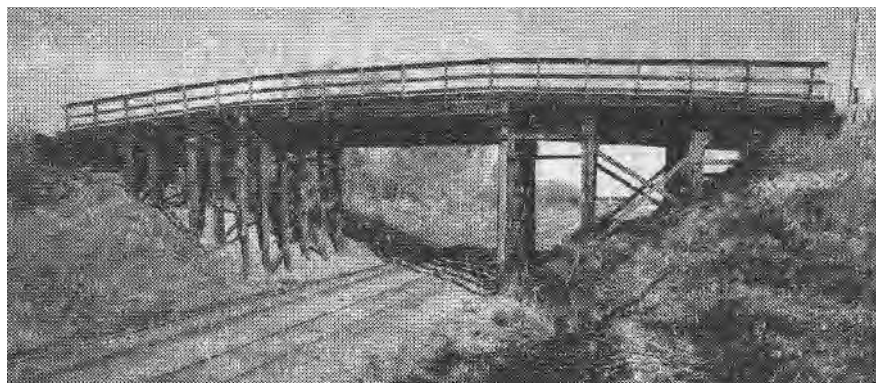
"I live on Leroy and drove my brothers Corvette over Norwich when I was in high school..."

"Good memories, teens loved to fly over the Suicide Bridge."

"Going over Suicide Bridge on a motorcycle, without touching the flat part."

"My first 'job' when I lived here was picking up exhaust parts on the suicide bridge."

If anyone has any photos of the bridges, the historical society would like to scan them for the photo archive.



The East Leroy Avenue Bridge



East Tripoli Avenue Bridge



St. Francis HISTORICAL SOCIETY

St. Francis Historical Society
3400 E. Howard Ave.
St. Francis, WI 53235

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Newsletter

Anna Passante
Barbara Janiszewski

Mark Your Calendar

Board Meetings

March 18, 2017 9:30 a.m.
General Meeting April 15, 2017 9:30 a.m.
May 20, 2017 9:30 a.m.

Cousin's Fundraiser:

Wednesday, March 22 4:00 p.m.-8:00 p.m.

Bike Auction:

Vretenar Park Saturday, May 6 10 a.m.

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