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A *baroque*

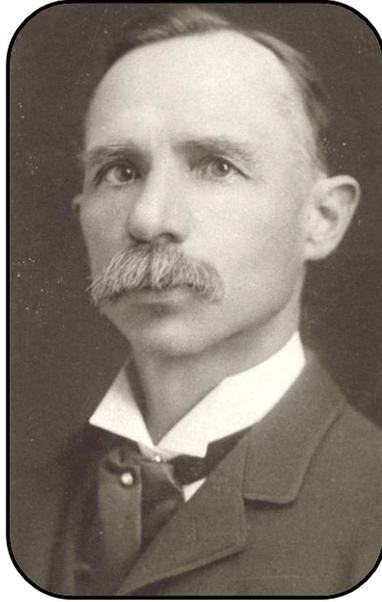
is a small, colorful pearl of irregular shape; they are discarded or ignored by those who search for the big, perfect pearl. While not valuable like a big ones, they are quite wonderful.

When it comes to stories, Prairie du Chien has so many big pearls that we neglect the small, curious ones. This column draws attention to them.

Free and Public

January 18, 2012

Leonard Cornelius was soft-spoken, persistent, shrewd, and frugal. When he passed away in 1931, he was also wealthy. When Mayme, the last Cornelius died in 1975, she split the family assets between St. Gabriel's and the city. Cornelius Family Park, the city's western gateway was built with the Cornelius bequest. The park is a wonderful asset but not more important than Leonard's other lasting legacy to the city.



Leonard A. Cornelius

In the early 1900s, the Women's Christian Temperance League approached Cornelius and asked for space for a reading room. He gave them a place in his building, now Fort Mulligan's, right across from tavern row. The good ladies were convinced that if young men had an alternative to taverns, they would turn away from a life of drink. People brought in their used books, magazines and newspapers and anyone could read there or borrow on the honor system. The reading room was popular, but the target audience did not give up the tavern for reading. Surprise! Surprise! Those who did like the room were not thrilled with its location near the bars.

A group of citizens formed the library committee and hired a librarian, Lydia Hesse. They struggled to keep the library going and began lobbying the city council to support a free, public library. Those early advocates

always used those essential adjectives *free and public* when talking about the library. In November 1911, the city council voted unanimously to take over the library, and in February 1912, they began housing the library in the council chambers where it remained for 50 years.

One name appeared on all the library committees— Leonard Cornelius. He had more than enough money to provide his family with all the reading material they could want, but Leonard wanted that free, public library. He was appointed to the library's first board of trustees and served until his death in 1931. To the frugal man, it made perfect sense to have access to many reading materials without having to pay for all of them. He thought the library was as essential to quality community life as good streets, a sewer system, water works and parks. After a term as mayor and several as city treasurer, he had a grasp of local issues, but set politics aside to give attention to his large family and his businesses.

Recently a library patron reminded me how important those founding adjectives, *free and public* still are 100 years later. "Think how amazing it is," she said. Everyone can have a continuing education and entertainment even if they don't have a lot of money. It's wonderfully democratic."

Leonard Cornelius who came here in 1873 and worked as a barber would agree. In 1885, he bought a jewelry store and began buying and selling pearls. He did very well and began accumulating property and wealth. In his twilight years, he gave his time and attention to creating a library that was free and open to everyone. As we celebrate the library's 100th anniversary, aren't we glad he did?

The Turtle Trade

February 20, 2012

In February 1912, people along the river were buzzing about reports they read in area papers.

W.T. Allen, a well-known commercial fisherman working the Mississippi between Prairie du Chien and Wabasha, brought 125 snapping turtles weighing 1,229 pounds across the frozen river from Prairie du Chien to McGregor. He transported the turtles in grain sacks that filled a bobsled box. A fish merchant paid him \$150 for the catch, repacked the turtles in barrels and shipped them by train to Philadelphia. New York, Boston, St. Louis and Chicago were also major markets. The animals were expected to survive the long trip by rail.

Allen had such a successful catch because he understood their habits and habitats. He knew as winter approached the turtles would seek a sheltered spot near weeds or a sunken log and burrow until their heads and half their bodies were submerged. Often 20 or more would gather in the same area. In spring, they would reemerge after the ice melted.

Allen waited for the ice to be strong enough to bear his weight. Then he searched for the half-buried turtles, made a hole in the ice and brought them up with a hook made especially for that purpose. Usually the harvest occurred in November. Allen put his catch in sack, carried them home over his shoulder and took them to the basement. The turtles would again burrow in for the winter in the damp and sandy cellar.

As Lent approached the demand for turtle was at its peak and the price as high as it would get. He dug the turtles out again and took them to the merchant across the river. In February, the going price was 18 cents a pound live weight compared to 5 cents in the summer. Some turtles weighed 25 pounds and brought as much as \$4.50 each—an attractive price.

The turtle trade was relatively new on the Upper Mississippi and residents were concerned with the number taken from the river. With other fishermen

following Allen's lead, they had reason for alarm. Every fish dealer on the river was relying on the buying and selling of turtles for a larger percentage of his business. According to reports, a million pounds had been shipped from the Upper Mississippi in the preceding year. The debate went on, and so did the harvest—in numbers that could threaten the survival of the snapping turtle.

A Gift for All Ages and Classes

April 9, 2012

My first full day in Prairie du Chien in late August 1970 was oppressively humid. I had recently returned to the US from a four-year stint with the Department of Defense Overseas Schools. I had lived in the Philippines, Germany and England; ironically, the cultural shock I felt that day rivaled any I experienced in faraway places.

I turned on *WPRE* to catch the weather and caught Orly Baker instead. The popular commentator was holding forth, “The teachers,” he alleged, “are no better than the hogs rooting in a trough.” I was still trying to process his remarks when I arrived at the door of the Little Theater for the first meeting of the school year. The other newbie taking things in was Dave Kasey. All the men were on the right side and all the women were on the left. I sat down near the back, took out my calendar and counted the days—it was going to be a long year.

I felt a little better after Mr. Mulrooney delivered his *Good Year Speech* persuading us that we were about to start a very successful year. On the last day, he reviewed what we did, and thanked us for another great effort. That happy ritual went on for 20+ years until he retired. Now, I am an unabashed cheerleader for Prairie du Chien, but it was not love at first sight by any means.

By the end of the first year, I liked the kids a lot, better than at any of my 4 previous schools. I'd argue that they are Prairie du Chien's best asset. Their close ties to their parents, their grandparents and the natural world have a lot to do with how well they turn out.

From the first, I was taken with the river and the bluffs, but it took 20 years before I was hooked on its history and heritage. My initial enthusiasm for its musical name cooled a bit when I learned it meant Prairie of the Dog.

Incredibly, this is my 100th column in the *Courier-Press*—54 *Tales of Old Fort Crawford* and 46 *Baroques*. That combined with the 100th anniversary of the library is cause for celebration. When Joseph and Emma Linzenmeyer Wachute donated the money for the building, they specified that their gift should be used to *better educate all ages and classes*. In that spirit, I am happy to announce that free access to my walking tour of our downtown is available on the Wachute Memorial Library's website. Anyone can download and use it. Think of it as a small thank you gift to the people of the area for a century of support for our library. Thank PDRI and the Chamber for encouraging its creation.

Up One Side and Down the Other is a 32-page loop tour of Blackhawk Avenue from Main Street up the north side to Illinois and down the south side back to Main. Thirty historic pictures illustrate the text. Expect regular updates; I've already revised it twice—the dynamic old street endlessly evolves.

The new logo [see the cover] is the work of the gifted John Mundt, Esq. With a few strokes, he captured the concept of the column perfectly. John is one of those best assets that grew up here and graduated from Prairie High. The uniquely talented Mike Valley is another. The former logo, a photo taken by Mike, shows up wonderfully in color but has too many gray tones to translate well to newsprint. So, for the 100th column, a new face.

I don't plan to write about myself for at least another 100 columns—if then. Next month, *Baroques* will return to our neglected little stories bypassed because we have so many *Buffalo Bill Riot* type tales just as the pearl fisher's pocket full of baroques was forgotten when he found the big pearl.

They Made Do

May 14, 2012

After Pearl Harbor, WWII began to affect people's daily lives. Because the war in the Pacific cut off the supply of rubber, tires had to be rationed. The county set up a board with the responsibility of deciding who got the tires each month. The county's quota for April 1942 was 9 new passenger tires, 5 retreads, 7 tubes, 34 new truck tires, 32 truck retreads and 33 truck tubes. Dr. Dessloch got the first new vehicle permit in Crawford County. Tire shortages persisted throughout the war. People reduced their leisure driving to conserve their tires. Farmers returned to their traditional ways doing as much work as they could with horses.

A local 20-year-old admitted stealing 3 tires and tubes. Later he confessed to taking 15 other tires, one at time. He faced federal charges that could have resulted in prison time and a \$10,000 fine. His draft number came up, but he could not join the army until he first faced his federal charges.

From June 15 to June 30, the nation's oil companies led a drive to collect scrap rubber. People were told to bring in anything—toys, balls, girdles, overshoes, fan belts, hoses, sponges, raincoats, hot water bottles, rubber heels and even old fruit jar rings. Better yet, they were urged to take up the rubber matting from the trunk of the car and replace it with an old carpet. The operators of the oil stations offered come around and pick up what people had. They were paying 1 cent per pound.

No sooner had the rubber drive been completed when they did the same with iron and paper—two supplies that Wisconsin went over the top collecting.

Citizens were reminded, "Steel is the raw material of victory! The tanks, howitzers, machine guns, and bullets that will drive the Axis rascals back in their holes, all require that precious metal— steel." They urged people to check their small items—manicure scissors, nail files and clippers, hair pins, bobby pins, tweezers and

blackhead extractors. In 1941, the cosmetic industry alone had consumed 1,815 tons of steel— enough to make 170 big 155mm guns. “Steel must not to be used for nonessential items; it must be used for winning the war.” By 1945, it was very difficult to buy a new appliance or vehicle of any kind.

Many everyday items including gas and foods like meat and sugar were scarce. In 1942, they were allotted an extra 25 lbs. of sugar for canning which didn’t go very far when women were putting up winter fruits and vegetables for large families. They resorted to canning apples and berries without sugar and adding it before serving them. The solution was not satisfactory, but as they said, “We made do, and we got by.”

In addition to rationing many articles, the US government asked people to invest 10% of their income in war bonds. A series of Liberty Limericks Ads reminded people of their importance to the war effort.

Said a lumberman named, Mr. Wood,
If we’d work just as hard as we could,
And all of us bought
The Bonds that we ought—
We’d dispose of Herr Hitler for Good!

As Memorial Day approaches, it may be worth recalling that in WWII everybody sacrificed, in contrast to the current conflict when the same few are asked to serve 3, 4 even 5 deployments. Perhaps that’s why this war has dragged on for more than 10 years becoming our longest.

June Celebrations

June 5, 2012

June has been a favorite month for celebrations in Prairie du Chien. Going back to the period of French Canadian influence, June 24, the Feast of St John the Baptist was a day to take a break from work and gather with friends and neighbors. Often they went to one of the coulees, had a picnic, tuned up the fiddle and danced the

day away. St. John the Baptist is the patron saint of French Canada and Newfoundland.

In 1910, the Marquette Statue was dedicated on June 17, the anniversary of Marquette and Joliet's arrival at the Mississippi in 1673. For years following Marquette Day was time for a community festival of some kind.

In the years when the city owned the Villa Louis, citizens had a big Villa Opening with a tea, a costume ball, two parades, a pageant and free admission. Most openings were held in May, but some were scheduled for mid-June.

Since 1975, the Rendezvous had been held on St. Feriole Island. This year will be the 37th. to be held over Father's Day weekend. The Mississippi Long Rifles patterned their event after the historic twice a year rendezvous held on the prairie during the fur trade. In the spring, the furs came in, and the accounts between trader and Indians were settled. In the fall, the Indians came to get supplied for their winter trapping.

Peter Pond, visited in 1775 and recorded his impressions of the event that combined business and pleasure in equal amounts.

"The Plains of the Dogs is called the Great Place of Rendezvous for the traders and Indians before they disperse to their wintering grounds meet in large numbers making their arrangements for the ensuing winter and sending their canoes in different directions. Likewise, they gave credits to the Indians who were all to rendezvous there in the spring. All the traders... and the Indians of several tribes play the greatest games. The French practice billiards and the Indians play ball.

The boats from New Orleans came, navigated by thirty six men who row as many oars. They bring on one boat 60 hogshead of wine besides ham and cheese to trade with the French and Indians." Pond indicated that traders from Illinois also came. Some of the French Canadians who settled here permanently came by way of Illinois. They were *The Illinois French*.

Early in the 1900's, street fairs and carnivals were held on Bluff Street, now Blackhawk Avenue. The city closed the street for a carnival for three or four days. Some years they closed for an afternoon and held a different foot race in each block along Bluff Street. Most fairs were held in June or leading up to the 4th of July.

In the 1920s and 30s when riverboat dance palaces plied the river, they often made their first appearances in June and held dinner dances on most summer weekends somewhere along the river.

May was almost as popular. The Villa Opening celebrations were often in May. The Great Fire Engine Race of the early 1970s was held on Memorial Day weekend. In 1900, the Great Railroad Excursion brought 16,000 people to town for scheduled activities. Memorial Day ceremony at the Fort Crawford Cemetery is a tradition more than 125 years old.

The early summer before the heat and the humidity catches up with us is prime time to celebrate here. If nothing big is scheduled, there is the river.

Yes, but Who Are You?

July 13, 2012

In the weeks following General Grant's death in July 1885, stories about him appeared in papers all over the country including one set in Prairie du Chien.

Representing his father's Galena leather goods company, Grant sold to merchants in Prairie du Chien in the late 1850s. A man cheated him out of a large sum and he hired O.B. Thomas as his lawyer. After some investigation, Thomas issued a *writ of replevin*, a legal recourse to have goods returned from a creditor. The sheriff had to deliver the writ. Since the sheriff was out of town, the job fell to the deputy sheriff, young Duff Brunson, the son of Judge Ira Brunson and grandson of Reverend Alfred Brunson. Nicknamed *The Boss* because he was quite impressed with his authority, the young Brunson probably would not have had the position except for his connections.

Brunson went with Grant and Thomas to the business place where the goods were stored. The door was locked. The man had heard that one of the Grant family would arrive and try to take back the goods. He locked himself inside with a shotgun and promised to shoot whoever came through the door.

Deputy Brunson backed away. Lawyer Thomas tried to persuade him that it was his job to open the door and serve the writ. Grant, who had remained silent, spoke up. "If you are afraid to go in yourself, deputize someone to go in for you." Although Brunson took offense at the suggestion that he lacked courage, he deputized Grant.

Grant was short but solidly built. He backed 10 or 12 feet away from the door, rushed it and planted his right foot near the lock. The door opened with a crash. Grant entered, disarmed the man and made him help box up the goods, which Grant took to Galena.

Fast forward to 1863.

2nd Lt. Duff Brunson was serving with the Wisconsin 31st near Chattanooga. He commanded a large detail unloading supplies from a train. He was aware of his rank and ordered his men around more than was necessary to accomplish the job.

A VIP train arrived, and several officers got off. A short man wearing an ordinary shirt not revealing his rank stopped to watch Brunson. Finally, the officer approached and asked, "Lieutenant, are you from Wisconsin?"

Brunson said that he was, and the officer had a second question. "Are you from Prairie du Chien?"

The younger man answered his superior, "Yes, I am, but who are you?"

"My name is Grant."

Duff Boss Brunson was speechless. "Grant? Good God, are you General Grant? You command me now, but I commanded you once and you knocked the door to hell in a second."

It is true that Grant transacted family business in Prairie du Chien in the late 1850s and that Duff Brunson served with the Wisconsin 31st and as

deputy sheriff; and O.B. Thomas was a well-respected lawyer elected to the US Congress.

Whether these particular events happened to these real people is less certain, but the episode circulated widely following the general's death. Like others we repeat, it is a fine story either way.

Miasma in the Sickly Months

August 13, 2012

In the days of Fort Crawford, people dreaded miasma or bad air, which they thought, brought on contagious diseases including malaria and cholera. The 1st Fort Crawford along the river was a disease magnet, and in the summer, the army surgeon was very busy treating fever and ague. It didn't help, that the fort often flooded, and the old wooden structure took on bad air and water which lingered within its logs.

In August 1847, the *Prairie du Chien Patriot* published a lengthy piece about marsh miasma. Miasma got much worse in the heat of summer. It wasn't deadly here as it often was in the tropical climates but still had "ruinous effects". The decomposition of plants made it worse. The bad air was most dangerous at night because the air was more dense and hung low to the ground. The bad air attached itself to the fog and was carried on the wind. Everybody knew fogs were unhealthy and to be avoided. So if people were wise they avoided the evening and early morning hours when fog was most likely to gather. If a person had to be in the fog, he should take some stimulating food so the bad air did not have such a strong effect on his system.

It was good to sleep on the upper floors or if outside on a rise or a hill. Since a person's system was more susceptible during hours of rest, it was just smart to sleep out of the bad air's reach. *The Patriot* warned, "The country in the vicinity of the Mississippi River in our Territory is to a high degree malarious, producing ague

and fever, which in many cases can be traced to improvident exposure.”

Their favorite treatment for miasma was *Sand's Sarsparilla*. They had to mail away to New York for it and pay \$1 per bottle or 6 for \$5. Seems the tradition of paying outrageous prices for medicine started long ago.

The smartest thing to do was to avoid getting sick. The settlers who had been around awhile learned never to put their gardens, orchards or manure yards on the west or south western side of the house unless it was a long ways from the dwelling. “The rotting of fruit, melons, squashes and such articles in very warm sickly weather produces a pestilential effluvia and the air which generally blows from the west and southwest which in the sickly month carries it directly to your dwelling and sickness will be the consequence.” The sickliest month around Prairie du Chien was usually August, but July could be as bad. We know something about sweltering Julys.

When first plowing new land, a settler should not plough land on the south or west of the living quarters for at least 3 years because of all the rich plant material in the soil. It was good for crops but not good for health. The settler was advised to break land on the north and the east first, and when he wanted to add the land to the south and the west, he should plow it in the late fall or early spring to avoid the effects of hot weather. The experienced farmer knew to put grain or hay to the south and west but never orchards or gardens. The barn and manure yards should always be on the northerly or easterly side.

It wasn't until well after the Civil War, that the germ theory of disease transmission replaced the belief that miasma, bad air, caused sickness.

Signs of the Time

September 19, 2012

Prohibition was going full swing in 1922 after the passage of the Volstead Act in 1919 outlawing the production and sale of alcohol. Moonshiners had enough time to develop effective ways of evading federal agents.

Bootlegging was a business that operated under the radar, so very little appeared in the papers unless someone got caught. Most of the good prohibition tales were transmitted orally.

In September 1922, the federal agent's presence was felt in this area. One news report told how bootleggers around here only did business under the cover of darkness. Maybe that's where we got the name *moonshine*. A bootlegger showed his ability and intent to sell by driving with one headlight. This signal worked well as long as the network was small and the secret closely held.

Eventually, the anti-booze league—their name for themselves— would get wind of the signal and alert the feds. However, during the election season, the anti-booze people opted to take a low profile especially if they were running for office. Their prohibition stance was always in the minority around here. Their position was clear. They talked for and against prohibition depending on who they were talking to. Some things never change.

According to the *Courier*, the one headlight communication was used in Prairie du Chien, McGregor, and Marquette as well as in Grant County especially Lancaster and Platteville. The authorities caught on to them, and they had to get a new signal.

Another report told of a man running a moonshine farm near here who had trained two watch ducks. When anyone approached where the illegal booze was buried, the ducks would quack noisily and the farmer would come out.

He was found out when one shabby looking visitor asked, "Is there any chance you might have a peck of potatoes for sale."

Imagine how surprised the farmer was when the visitor turned out to be a federal agent. The law breakers would wait in jail for a trial, pay a fine of several hundred dollars, maybe do sometime in jail. Before long they would be out and in business with a new cover, new password and new signals. The whole cycle would begin again.

In the fall of 1922, the area bootleggers got organized. They developed a system of warning against impending raids. If they were caught, they were immediately represented by legal counsel who seemed to appear out of nowhere. In Iowa the bootlegger's bunch hired their own detectives. They were paid from a fund assessed to members. They paid from \$10 to \$50 depending on the size of their operations.

That summer in Waukon, the sheriff arrested a man and confined him to the county jail awaiting trial. He broke out of his cell and sneaked out through the basement. The sheriff wanted to track him with bloodhounds, but they were not available for 11 hours. When they did get the dogs, they tracked the man to his property where he had his still up and running. They put him back in jail. When the judge finally got his case, he fined the man a large amount and sentenced him to a year in prison doing hard labor. More than likely, he did his time, paid his fine and went back into business.

In late 1933, the 21st amendment repealed the 18th, and it was again legal to make and sell alcohol. States could retain the right to limit the sale and manufacture. Certain areas in a state had such restrictive laws that they may as well have had prohibition. For a time, many of our neighbors in Iowa and Minnesota found their way to Prairie du Chien where they faced fewer restrictions. During those years, Prairie du Chien had taverns on almost every corner. It wasn't until 1966 that states gave up their attempts to prohibit drinking.

The Metro

October 10, 2012

In the summer of 1949, George Panka upgraded his Metro Theater adding all new seats. As the late show was ending around midnight on Wednesday October 12, George detected a fire in the K.C. Hall above the theater. Within 20 minutes, the fire raged out of control, engulfed the Metro Block and threatened the downtown businesses. Flames leaped 100 feet illuminating the sky. Thirty-five firemen from Prairie du Chien and another 14 from McGregor fought to contain it. About 2:00 a.m., the brick west wall of the structure collapsed and the fire burned itself out. The Metro Theater, the Panka Tavern, the sweet shop, K.C. Hall and Mac Holda Dental Office were destroyed. The Panka brothers estimated the losses for the block between \$500,000 and \$600,000.

There was a severe coal shortage in the winter of 1949-50, and the Pankas sold their unneeded supply to the public school so the school could remain open. The brothers regrouped and rebuilt opening the current facilities in May 1950.

The 1949 fire was the fourth Metro fire and the 5th major blaze on that corner.

The first was the Mondell Hotel Fire in December 1880, a devastating blow as it had been a center for community activities since 1856. Despite its importance, no picture of the Mondell House has surfaced. One photographer, William McFeeters, who may have had some glass plate negatives of the Mondell, lost everything in the 1899 fire.

Frank Smrcina, an enterprising Bohemian, bought the Mondell site in 1900 and built the Metro Block on that corner. His son, Vince, installed a new theater called *the Metropolitan*. It featured vaudeville acts, high school graduations and community events like wrestling matches and political speeches. The grand opening was in January 1900. The Metro Block included two stores, Opat Shoes and Smrcina Clothing in addition to the theater. The pre-Lenten masquerade balls sponsored by the

Bohemian CSPS were held at the Metro most years. The all night dancing parties were a highlight of winter for half a century. The Bohemian Knights of Columbus met there. Vaudeville acts like the Georgia Minstrels were regular fare.

The Metro Block was still new when it burned in September 1903; they suspected arson, but it was never proven. The loss was \$30,000 with only \$4,000 insured. The shoe and clothing stores lost all their merchandise including a new shipment of clothing that not been unpacked. In the early days of insurance, they rarely insured for the full value. Unstable walls were all that stood after the fire. They razed the buildings, and the corner was empty until March 1905 when they began rebuilding. In November 1905, they had a grand opening for the New Metro. The Eagles' Club met there. In 1912, they promoted a boxing and wrestling carnival featuring local talent.

Frank Smrcina died in March 1913. Later that year his fellow Bohemian, John Panka, bought much of his property including the Metro Block. Vince Smrcina moved to St. Louis. John's son, George, ran the theater for many years. In April 1914, Booker T. Washington gave a lecture there. In October 1914, people rushed to see *The Sinking of the Titanic*. In 1920, the Legion Hall occupied the 2nd floor.

In 1936, the third Metro fire forced a major upgrade. Panka added the state of the art RCA Magic Voice projector system. In March 1937, the Metro reopened with a gala event. In 1939, they added a popular sweet shop. In May 1940, they showed *Gone with the Wind*. In October 1949, they lost the Metro again. Since 1996, *Kramer Real Estate and Auction Service* has been at home in the old Metro.

The Grand Old Man

November 15, 2012

William Stanislaus Hoffman came to Sacred Heart



William S. Hoffman

College in 1910 as an English teacher. In 1912, he married a local girl, Anne Fagan. That year in addition to his classroom work, he began helping with athletics.

In 1918, he became the head of athletics at Campion, coaching football, basketball and track. He compiled a winning record that is still the envy of many. In 1941, the Wisconsin State Journal referred to him as the *Grand Old Man of Campion*. According to the

Journal, you could not miss his trademark great overcoat, his ever-present big black cigar and sparkling smile. If a team was playing a Hoffman team, they would want to bring their *A* game. Too often, that was not enough to beat Campion. In 1941, the football team won all nine games and was scored upon just once. His 1931 team carried him off the field after the last game. Coach Bill might be little hard of hearing and graying at the temples, but he could still coach.

Bill retired from active coaching in 1952 after 40 years of involvement with Campion sports. In May 1963, Hoffman Hall was dedicated with the La Crosse bishop and many Jesuits on hand. His fellow coaches and reporters who covered him came to celebrate his career and see the new sports complex.

His leadership and success in sports is well known in his adopted hometown and around the state. Campion had a

number of esteemed faculty—Bill Hoffman always made that short list.

Being a winning coach for 40 years, raising five children and being active in various community organizations was not all he did. Few remember that he wrote two historical novels set in Prairie du Chien. The first, published in 1920, was entitled *Richard Haddon: A Romance of Old Fort Crawford*. In 1931, he published a second novel, *The Untamed Wilderness*, about the Red Bird Uprising. He planned a third, but either it was never published or didn't enjoy the attention the first two received. Hoffman did not win great acclaim as a writer; however, his stories were important in this area and were enjoyable to many fans of historical fiction. Unfortunately, both books are out of print now and hard to find.

Hoffman was a good friend of Dr. Peter Scanlan and August Derleth who also wrote of Prairie du Chien's history. Although the works of both are better known than Hoffman's, his books are equally enjoyable.

Someone who knew him well as a child said that at the time she was not so impressed with his achievements although he seemed to excel at everything he tried. To her the remarkable William S. Hoffman was a very gentle person who was always a gentleman. The way he treated others mattered as much as all he accomplished.

After 58 years in Prairie du Chien, Hoffman died in 1968 and was buried at Calvary Cemetery next to his beloved Anne, who had died a decade earlier.

As Hoffman Hall reopens this month, we can enjoy the updated facility and reflect on its namesake, William S. Hoffman — a good man whose enduring legacy is his example of a life well lived.

A Christmas Fire

December 17, 2012

Christmas 1917 was a tough day in Eastman.

At St. Wenceslaus, Father Brommenshenkel held three morning masses at 5:00, 6:00 and 10:00. When parishioners gathered, they couldn't know it was the last time they would congregate in their new church.

About 4:00 p.m. on Christmas Day, Father noticed that the church was on fire. At first, he thought he might be able to save a few valuables, but the blaze was too advanced. By the time the firemen and others arrived, the church was engulfed, and before dark, only the bare walls stood. The loss was set at \$12,000. Only \$5,000 was insured. Later they surmised that an overheated furnace or Christmas candles had caused the fire. The new parsonage, completed only a few months before, was partially scorched from the intense heat, but was otherwise undamaged. A little paint would repair it; however, there was nothing left of the church or its contents.

The blow was worse because it happened on the most important church day for Catholics and all Christians. It's also such an important family time when people return to the place where they grew up to celebrate. Many extended families attended mass together that Christmas morning before they enjoyed their gift giving and special foods. Goose would have been the centerpiece of many of those Bohemian holiday dinners. Until these tragedies happen, people don't think much about how important their shared institutions and special buildings are. A generation of family members were baptized, confirmed, married and buried from the St. Wenceslaus that was in ashes. They also lost their collective community memories created in 11 years of worshipping together in their new church.

The Catholics had been worshipping in Eastman since 1847 when it was mission attached to St. Gabriel's. After St. John's was established in the 1890's, their priest served the Eastman mission. Early the Eastman faithful

laid a foundation for a church, but it was many years before they could afford to build it. In 1881, the congregation had grown with the influx of Bohemians Catholics, and they built a fine stone church. One source said the church was built in 1884.

Unfortunately, the 1917 fire wasn't the first for St. Wenceslaus. On July 26, 1906, the church was struck by lightning and burned to the ground. The electrical storms were unusually destructive that Friday. In another part of Wisconsin, five players were killed on the baseball field. The congregation rebuilt the church gathered there for Christmas Masses in 1906. They began 1918 in the midst of war faced with having to rebuild a church that was only 11 years old; it's not the way anyone wants to welcome a new year. While they were without a church, they held mass in several halls in Eastman.

The 1918 Christmas Masses in the new church were cause for rejoicing— it was Christmas again, the war was over, the new church was built. Christmas 2012 will be the 94th celebrated in the third St. Wenceslaus building.