

Stockton's Past

A Special Community Event

Shortly after Al Gavin was elected as supervisor in the early 1990's to serve on the Stockton town board, he accidentally discovered some forgotten treasures that are of unlimited value to the town. One day, slowly and curiously, he began looking over information stored in a very old roll-top desk which was located in an office at the town garage. It was stuffed to the brim with old papers, maps and books. After skimming through some of this material he realized this couldn't be all there was. There had to be more, but where?

After thinking about it for a few minutes, he decided to make a quick visit to the *old* town hall. This hall was Stockton's original Town Hall and was built in the late 1870's. Town officials had closed the building in 1976 for various reasons, and the town's people began to use the Community Center near Arnott for election voting with board meetings held in the town garage.

As Supervisor Gavin entered the silent old building, he was pleasantly surprised. The building was still in pretty good shape, considering its age. He could see that the rodents had taken over throughout the years. The hall needed cleaning and a few improvements, but amazingly it looked the same as he remembered. Memories of voting and attending meetings in this building in his younger years filled his mind.

Slowly glancing around the one room hall, he almost couldn't believe what he saw. His eyes quickly focused on an over-stuffed desk and cabinet standing in the corner with numerous maps and road plans rolled up and stored on top. This was exactly what he was hoping to find. It was a real treasure that possibly held the key to unlocking some of the past history of Stockton. He and Clerk Steve Haka moved the most current records to the clerk's office. The rest were stored in a basement room of the now called Stockton Municipal Building.

In 1997, at the supervisors' suggestion, a committee was formed to evaluate all town property and also review this wealth of information. Approximately seven large storage containers and several plastic bags of materials plus, had to be looked through. This process was extremely slow. Just about everything was completely filthy with dust and debris.

First of all, the material was inventoried. It included contracts, blueprints, correspondence, poll lists, licenses, school reports, surveys, assessment rolls, statistical reports, cancelled checks, different studies and plans, tax records, registrations, birth records, death records, marriage records, easements, deeds, maps, petitions, town plats, and much, much more. Some of each year's information was folded and bound together with strips of fabric, twine or string. Straight pins were used to attach papers together and a few reports were hand-sewn with ribbon or thread.

After this material was inventoried, the process of clean up began. This too went very slowly and because much of it was very old and brittle, special care had to be taken. It was then categorized by year, and each year was carefully wrapped to protect the papers from any further damage in handling or storage. A large fireproof file cabinet was purchased, and most of the material put safely away. A number of books found lying around in the old hall were cleaned up and are now stored in a cabinet at the municipal building. The earliest records found, dated back to the 1850's.

During this clean up process, word got around that information on Stockton's early years was stored away at the University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point Archives. A visit to the archives led committee members to another surprising fact unknown by any. Someone had already sent to the Archives *some* of those early town records. But who had done this and why only some records and not all? The answer as to who and why has not yet been found and continues to be a mystery, although, through all the tedious research a suspect has begun to emerge.

All this led the committee to the next stage of their project. Now that the information was found, they wanted to share it and inform all the towns' people of their history. The question was, just how could that be accomplished?

While the committee was doing all this discovering, the town board received information from Portage County's Wisconsin Sesquicentennial Steering Committee. They gave a synopsis of what was being planned countywide during Portage County's sesquicentennial year 1998. One plan was a sesquicentennial parade in which they encouraged all municipalities in Portage County to participate.

(Stockton's Past continued)

Town supervisors met with the committee and options were discussed. One idea presented was re-opening the old town hall as the town's response to the sesquicentennial celebration. There, the committee could present some of this information for anyone who might be interested. Mr. Gavin also informed the committee of the 1961 antique truck/plow the town still had, and the possibility of entering that in the parade. The truck needed some work and had to be restored. Also mentioned was the old desk and possibly restoring that. He thought both projects were

feasible. The committee agreed to holding an open house at the old town hall, restoring the roll-top desk and truck, and entering this truck in the parade.

A decision was made to go to the town board, ask for funds to do a few improvements on the old building, and to try to restore the 1961 FWD Clintonville truck/plow with the antique grader, as well as restoring the old desk. The board agreed with the plans and granted the committees request.

Supervisor Gavin found someone who would do the restoration of the desk and also wrote to the company from which the truck was purchased, for recommendations on the proper way to restore the *Clintonville*. Even though the truck was still an active part of the town's fleet, employees got it running in top shape and worked diligently on restoring it to its former beauty. When the tasks were complete, both the desk and the truck looked awesome.

The truck was entered in the Sesquicentennial Parade held on June 6, 1998 in Stevens Point, Wisconsin. Later that fall, it was entered in the University homecoming parade where it won an award. The town received the second place award for originality and a prize of \$25. The roll-top desk now sits in the Old Town Hall Museum. In town records the desk was traced back to 1918, however, it is older than that, because in that year it was only *moved* from one location to another.

As those restorations progressed, Supervisor Gavin over-saw that the roof of the old hall was restored, the rodents were eradicated, and the front steps were repaired. Supervisor Jeanne Dodge helped committee members' research and prepare information that was to be shown at the hall opening. The weekend before the event, both supervisors and the clerk, along with committee members and their spouses spent hours cleaning up the inside of the old building, washing floors and windows, doing minor repairs and setting things in place for the re-opening of the old *town house* (as it was referred to in town records in those early years). The open house was held Sunday afternoon July 12, 1998.

The main focuses for that first opening were town hall beginnings and elected officials. A listing of all elected officials who served the town from 1855 to 1998 was compiled and put on display. At the UWSP Archives and in town records researchers uncovered much information on how the town hall came to be built on that precise location, contracts and plans for construction, and who actually did the construction. Within the mound of information discovered, also found were the actual bid process, check stubs and canceled checks for the building project done in 1877. Also included were old pictures as well as copies of other interesting information found, all put out for visitors to review.

To publicize this community event, Supervisor Gavin contacted the area newspaper. An article covering the town hall opening was printed just before it was held. Invitational notices were posted in various locations of the town inviting everyone. Specifically invited were past elected officials, and most who were invited attended. Guests of honor were the family of deceased former town chairman, Stanley Kirshling. He held the position of supervisor for four years, and town chairman to thirty-eight years. Also in attendance were Frank Somers, supervisor for thirty-two years, Richard Gosh, treasurer for ten years, Jerome Groshek, supervisor for ten years, Prosper (Perky) Gosh, supervisor for eight years, Lyle Halberslaben who served four years as supervisor and two years as chairman, and also former supervisor John O'Keefe. Approximately 275 other interested area residents also attended that day and all involved in the project were well pleased with the turnout.

Shortly after this special community event, an open house was again held in the fall. While most of the information shown at the first opening remained at the *Town House*, an effort was made to add more. Requests were made for old pictures of anything pertaining to the Town of Stockton or its residents. Supervisor Gavin gathered a number of pictures of the old town schools with town residents supplying others as well as pictures of students in class and their teachers. That quickly became the theme of the second open house. Information was found on every rural school located in the town throughout the years and it was put on display for town residents, who sometimes saw themselves in pictures and remembered the day it was taken. Though the number attending the second opening was smaller, most agreed it was well worth the effort, and without the cooperation of our supervisors, neither event would have happened.

The process of searching through this historical treasure is not complete and much information is yet to be gleaned. Most of this history will eventually go to the State Historical Society, however, some will remain in the town historical files.