

Gathering Together

Well, I don't even know that my great-grandparents ever learned how to speak English, because I think that they moved into a community that was their friends and relatives, and they could go to church, they could go to the stores, and communicate with the neighbors in the native language.

— Eugene Felix, Stanley, interviewed 2000, speaking of the time between 1880 and 1920

The Perovsek family came to Willard from Slovenia in 1908. With his neighbors, Frank Perovsek helped organize the Willard Cooperative Dairy and the North Hendren Cooperative Dairy, and helped build the buildings that housed them. He also had a hand in building the Holy Family Catholic Church, where he worshiped, and the North Willard school, where his children went.

In addition to the natural beauty and ancestral ties their farmsteads may offer, farm families are tied to the land by a sense of community. This attachment is born and maintained at peoples' homes and in farm work done together, but also, importantly, at gathering spots in rural towns. The general store may have become the convenience store, the saloon the sports bar, and the farrier the auto mechanic, but the stories are still about mighty white-tail bucks and the jokes about Ole and Lena.

Pleasant Valley Homemakers Club members showing off the party hats they had made in their monthly meeting, early 1950s, Chippewa County. Courtesy of Bev Peterson.



Investing in Each Other

. . . the middleman's the one who gets it all.

— from the song “The Farmer Is the Man,” Farmers Alliance Songbook, 1890s

Top: Ridgeland Cenex feedmill co-op, 1950s. Courtesy of Wisconsin Farmers Union.

Bottom: Ridgeland Cenex, 2004. Photographer: Frank Smoot.

As immigrants settled the Chippewa Valley and began to farm, they had to pay high prices to have goods brought in. But they got little money in return for their produce, and had little control over its marketing, sale, or distribution. As early as the 1840s in Wisconsin, farm families formed cooperatives to protect their interests, and also to accomplish goals no family could accomplish alone, such as road-building, rural electrification, or insurance against disaster.

Cooperatives sprang from traditions brought over from Europe, and many were formed within ethnic settlements. However, based on the values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity, cooperatives soon bound farmers together across ethnic lines against large “outside” forces, both corporate and governmental.

They also became civic organizations. The Washington Co-operative Creamery near Eau Claire — which began business in 1890 — had an auditorium with seating for 300. Beyond a space for its member meetings, the co-op opened the room for community Christmas parties and other local functions. In 1902, the co-op joined with eleven other country creameries to form the Eau Claire Creamery Company, which, in addition to its business, helped educate boys and girls about farming and sponsored annual farm events for FFA and 4-H members.

You take this little Ridgeland down here. If that didn't have that Cenex store, feedmill, and all, there wouldn't be no town. . . . That little town would have dried up. It's just a booming little town now. The only reason it's there is because of that co-op.

— Harris Kahl, *Prairie Farm*, interviewed 1998



Building a Cooperative

In 1942, the Colfax Co-op Creamery satisfied its mortgage and gained the right to burn the papers. The whole Village of Colfax turned out to celebrate with a parade and barbecue. The cooperative had been in operation since 1905, and built its new “modern” building in 1929. Members had to take out a mortgage since obtaining railroad rights had taken most of the previous 24 years’ profits.

A cooperative is an organization started, owned, and run by the people who use its facilities and services. In the Chippewa Valley, many area businesses and utilities have been community-owned cooperative enterprises, including feed stores, creameries, cheese factories, feed mills, insurance agencies, and fueling stations; electric and telephone utilities; and egg-selling, ice-cutting, silo-filling, livestock trading, grain exchanging, and threshing services.

Although not all cooperatives succeeded, some have grown into political and economic powerhouses. The Wisconsin Energy Cooperative, a federation of eighteen central and western Wisconsin energy cooperatives, had a membership of 158,000 in 2004. Cenex Harvest States Cooperative, organized in 1931 as the Farmers Union Central Exchange, grew into a Fortune 500 company with 2003 sales of more than \$9 billion.

What we did was form cooperatives, put our products together, and ... marketed our products through cooperatives.... People who work for General Motors call themselves businessmen; employees is what they are. We are the businessmen, we are the keyholders, we are the capitalists.

— Mike Taft, Osseo, interviewed 2000



Top: “Mortgage parade,” Colfax, 1942. Bottom: Central Exchange Co-op can.

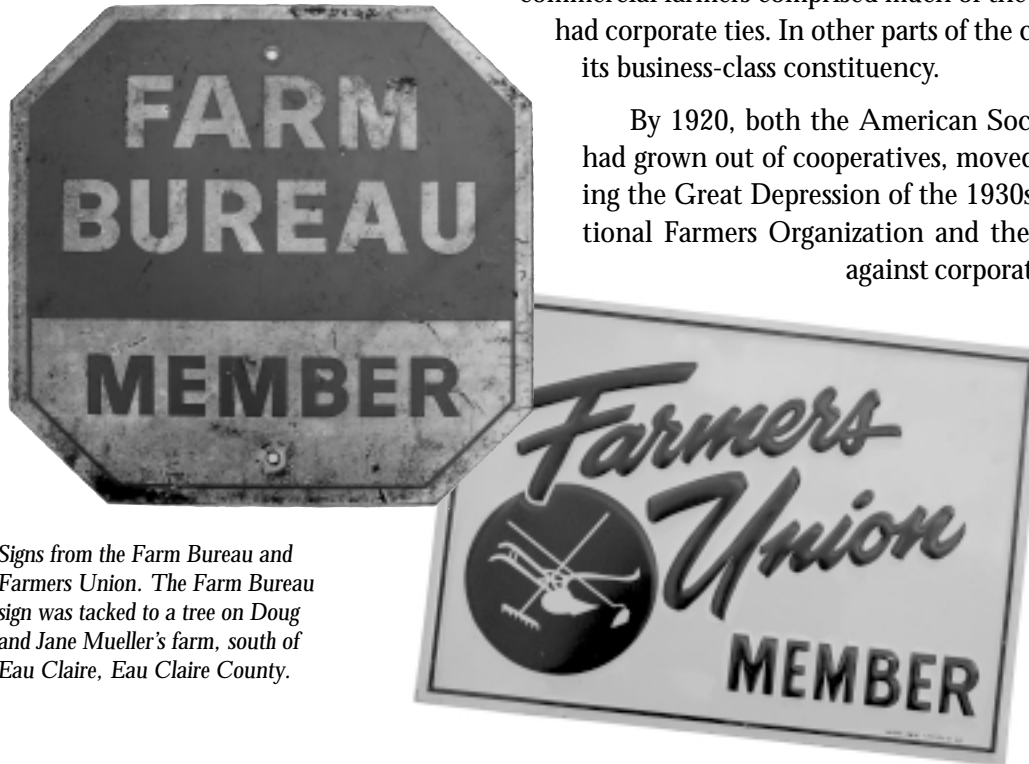
“The Farmer Feeds Them All”

Many organizations have sought to organize farmers. Among the oldest of these were the Grange, formed in 1867, and the more-radical National Farmers Alliance, formed in 1877. In the 1890s, the Farmers Alliance took the lead in creating the Populist Party to “restore the government of the Republic to the hands of the ‘plain people’.” One of its rallying cries was “The farmer feeds them all!” While the party itself was short-lived, many of the its platforms have since been adopted into law.

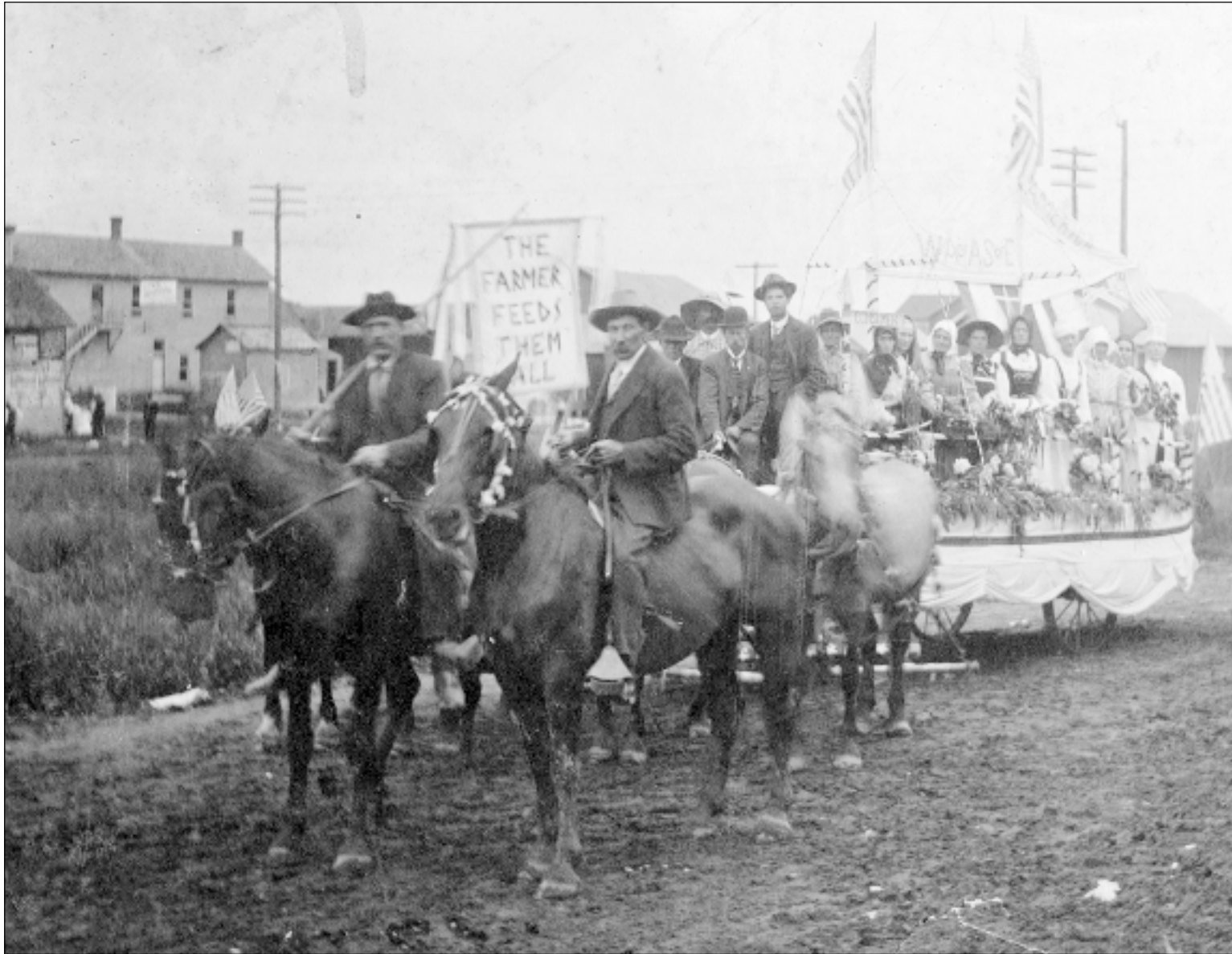
Wisconsin farmers seem to have preferred more moderate organizations such as the Farm Bureau. State and county farm bureaus across the country, which date to the 1910s, helped fund county agricultural agents and promoted scientific agriculture. In 1919, these farm bureaus joined into the American Farm Bureau Federation, which came to be known simply as the Farm Bureau. Wealthier commercial farmers comprised much of the Farm Bureau’s membership, and the federation had corporate ties. In other parts of the country, farmers distrusted the Farm Bureau and its business-class constituency.

By 1920, both the American Society of Equity and the Farmers’ Union, which had grown out of cooperatives, moved into lobbying and collective bargaining. During the Great Depression of the 1930s, more radical organizations including the National Farmers Organization and the Farm Holiday Association organized farmers against corporate interests, and promoted political actions such as protests and “milk strikes.”

While the goals of these organizations sometimes seemed to be at odds with one another, many farmers belonged to more than one. As a young man in the 1930s, Harold Tomter of Pigeon Falls belonged to both an auxiliary of the Farm Bureau — to learn “how to make a living” — and the Farmers’ Union, which was “attempting to get you a better living.”



Signs from the Farm Bureau and Farmers Union. The Farm Bureau sign was tacked to a tree on Doug and Jane Mueller’s farm, south of Eau Claire, Eau Claire County.



Float of the local chapter of Wisconsin Association of the American Society of Equity at the Inter-County fair, Stanley, 1908. Courtesy of Stanley Area Historical Society.

Neighbors: Help when You Need It

If it was threshing time, you went over and helped your neighbor and then when it come your turn, he'd come by and help you. So that brought the whole community together.

— Earl Myers, Town of Springbrook, Dunn County,
interviewed 1998, speaking about the 1930s

Sunday morning, May 17, 1953, tractors began to roll onto Bob Peterson's Chippewa County farm. Peterson, normally strapping at 6'3" and 240 pounds, had been laid low by rheumatic fever, and his friends and neighbors decided to help him with his spring field work. Plows, disks, harrows, and a planter roamed the fields. A crew cleaned out stock pens and another fixed fences. "I never knew I had so many friends," Peterson told the *Chippewa Herald-Telegram*. "It's a wonderful feeling to realize that others are so ready to help."

Neighbors plowing the field for Bob Peterson after he became bed-ridden with rheumatic fever, 1953. Six other tractors helped in the field that day, and additional crews cleaned the cow pens, fixed the pasture fences, mowed the lawn, and helped in the garden. Courtesy of Bev Peterson.

Neighbors helped each other complete large tasks, such as threshing or building barns. They even built civic structures such as churches and schools together. They also took on many of the civic duties we now think of as responsibilities of our county, village, or city governments — including fighting fires, grading roads, putting in poles for power lines, building bridges, and finding ways to finance it all.



As technology advanced, families could complete their farm work with less help, and they felt more isolated from their neighbors. Still, such events as benefit dances and the day-to-day operation of small-town or rural volunteer fire-and-rescue departments suggest that the spirit of mutual assistance survives.

When we first moved into Bloomer ... we were only there six months and a tornado pretty much took down most of our buildings and left just the house and the greenery. And boy, we learned our neighbors real quick.... It was just, just a devastating situation. Threw us all together and we realized all we had in common.

— *Ilene Moos, Bloomer, interviewed 2000, speaking of a tornado in 1977*



Neighbors working together to shovel a path wide enough to get the snow plow in to finish the job, 1936, northeast of Baldwin, St. Croix County. Courtesy of Myron Hesselink.

Chore coat worn by Bob Donaldson on his farm near Eau Claire. It was a gift from the Town of Union volunteer fire department.

Raffle ticket for the Rock Falls Volunteer Fire Department annual fundraiser, 2003.



Rural Rescue

In 2000, more than 50 fire fighters from four departments joined neighbors and family members to battle a barn blaze on Wayne and Cheryl Bowe's Town of Tilden farm. The barn, full of hay and straw in late August, was a total loss. But the firefighting effort saved the Bowe's four silos. The Bowes had twice before lost barns on the same site, by fire in 1930 and high winds in 1933.

After a disastrous 1881 fire in Durand, its citizens started a volunteer fire department. But other parts of the Chippewa Valley had to rely on neighbors with buckets well into the twentieth century. At some point a village or township board authorized an equipment purchase, and a fire department was born. Recent additions to area departments include such high-tech tools as SCBA gear and thermal imagers for "seeing" through smoke.

To finance such technology, departments are often awarded Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grants, but many departments also hold local fundraisers. In 2003, the Rock Creek Fire Department held a Pork Feed and Dance, at which they raffled cash and other prizes. In 2004, United Fire and Rescue, serving Hammond, Baldwin, and Woodville, planned a pancake breakfast, smelt fry, auction, and car show.

Although modern firefighting and rescue efforts are organized, rural residents still rely on their neighbors. The 1999 roster of the New Auburn Area Fire Department included a farmer, a butcher, a grader operator, a school teacher, a truck driver, a lawn-mower repairman, a writer, and a mother of five. These trained amateurs assembled, whenever the need arose, to save what they could of their neighbors' houses, barns, and fields.

Courage, a good neighbor and quality medical services made all the difference for Ed Hanson, 78, who was injured Oct. 15 [2003] in a horse-driving accident on his farm north of Baldwin. Mr. Hanson retired in 1993 but continued working on his farm. Without an active dairy to maintain, he's been able to work the land with horses instead of machinery.

— The Country Today, 2003. Hanson's neighbor Randy Baumann, who was driving past, stopped when he saw the horse team pulling a plow without a driver.

No. 6169	
Rock Creek Fire Department Pork Feed and Dance	
Rock Creek Town Hall, Rock Falls, WI Saturday, August 23, 2003	
<p>1st: \$400 Cash Each Donating \$50: Al's Auto Sales Hide-A-While Bar Conrad's Auto Salvage State Farm Insurance Kirchner Trucking & Excavating Mark's Painting & Drywall Meridian Siding & Construction Rock Falls Chiropractic</p>	<p>2nd: \$200 Cash Each Donating \$100: Marshfield Clinic Rock Falls Mini Storage, LLC 3rd: \$100 Gift Certificate Donated by: Sandberg's Auto 4th: \$100 Gift Certificate Donated by: Bauer Bull 5th: 2-\$25 Certificates Donated by: Countryside Cooperative 6th: \$50 Savings Bond Donated by: Security National Bank Tickets donated by: Sandberg's Auto</p>
<p>Name _____</p> <p>Address _____</p> <p>City _____</p> <p>Phone _____</p> <p>ROCK CREEK FIRE DEPT. PORK FEED & DANCE</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">Serving Food 4:00-10:00 PM Music by: "The Contenders" 8:00 PM to Midnight Donation: \$1.00 or 6 for \$5.00 • Lic. # R0005678A-01993</p>



Fighting the barn fire at Wayne and Cheryl Bowe's farm, Town of Tilden, 2000.

Meeting Places

[In our neighborhood,] we had the Sampsons and the Kearns and the Agasetts, and Torgersons and Rasmussens, Halversons, Jacobsons. Pretty much all Norwegians.... I remember we, we had a picnic one summer, 19 — oh, about 1906, I think. We had about, oh, must have been 65 people there, kids and all, at the Petersons ... and Jacobsons — they all got together — Olsons.... They all came with horse and buggies, and some of them walked.

— Melvin Christopher, Menomonie, interviewed in 1998

The hamlet of Allen was so small that, unlike most Chippewa Valley communities, it didn't have a church or a tavern. "But then," local resident Art Nix told the *Eau Claire Leader-Telegram*, "if it didn't have a tavern, it didn't need a church." People got together at the John Deere farm implement dealership. "Those John Deere Days were pretty good," said Nix, "with free beer and free food. There would be cars and trucks all over town for that. It was one of the biggest events of the year."

Taverns, halls, cafes, churches, cooperatives, volunteer fire departments, cemeteries, and team sports leagues were generally supported by the same people in a rural community. Those people hosted, staffed, and attended fairs and festivals. Events such as the Eleva-Strum Broiler Festival and Augusta's Bean and Bacon Days brought farmers and non-farmers together and were often used to introduce farmers to new ideas, methods, and equipment.

As time passed, better roads and cars allowed people to shop in cities, technology allowed a family to accomplish work it once took a neighborhood to do, and "outsiders" began moving in to rural neighborhoods, using them as bedroom communities or refuges from the urban world. Despite these changes, rural gathering places still formed an economic system and a human network that sustained rural life.

*Dairy Days parade, Barstow Street, Eau Claire, 1956 or 1957.
Photographer: Davis Studio*





*Eau Claire County 4-H fair held in Augusta, 1929.
Courtesy of Augusta School District.*

*Margaret Russell with her calf at the Eau Claire County
4-H fair, Augusta fairgrounds, 1925.*

Bright Lights

In the first years the Chippewa Valley was settled, families rarely travelled off the home place. When they did, it was usually to church, less often to town. Once or maybe twice a year, the town would shine under the torches or lights of the county fair or a passing circus. For young people of the Valley's early days, this might be their first experience with the larger world beyond the boundaries of the home place or the neighborhood.

Sometimes combined with carnivals, pageants, and other activities, fairs have long had a complex relationship with their audiences. On the one hand they were family fun and the place for neighbors to engage in fellowship and friendly competition, from four-wheeled-wagon backing demonstrations to pie-making — and pie-eating — contests. On the other hand, they could expose visitors to unsavory elements. They were good wholesome fun in daylight, an illicit adventure at night.

*The rabbit barn at the Rusk County 4-H fair, Ladysmith, 2003.
Photographer: Kathleen Roy.*



Besides bringing a little piece of the city to the country, however, the fair also brought the country to the city — an opportunity for city dwellers to see farm animals, tractors, and other trappings and activities of rural life.

First organized by agricultural societies, agricultural fairs were promoted by extension services, land-grant colleges, and local trade-center merchants to display, demonstrate, or even introduce ideas and products relating to farming and rural life. Fairs let farmers show off their wares and teach the non-farming public about their economy and the goods and services they offered. Fairs also gave a chance for young people to improve and demonstrate their skills in a wide variety of endeavors, including art, mechanics, science, riding, and animal husbandry.

I got my chores done and I didn't change overalls either, and that, she never forgot that. And she come in the restaurant and I was sittin' there and I says, "You know what I think? I think we should go to the Menomonie Fair tonight." She says, "I think we should, too." And that's how we got started.

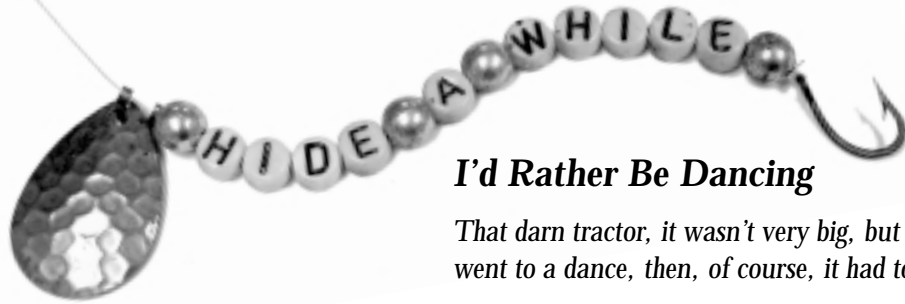
*— Harris Kahl, Prairie Farm, interviewed 1998,
on courting his wife of 56 years*



A selection of rosettes and ribbons from the Eau Claire County Junior Fair, the Eau Claire County Holstein Breeders, Northwest Wisconsin District Fair in Chippewa Falls, and the Rusk County Junior Fair. "Premium" winners, such as represented by the ribbon at left, took home cash as well as honor.

Russells Corners 4-H Club, Augusta fairgrounds, Eau Claire County, 1922.





I'd Rather Be Dancing

That darn tractor, it wasn't very big, but it'd go night and day as long as I wasn't going to dances. If I went to a dance, then, of course, it had to sit still.

— Clarence Werner, Weston, interviewed 1998, remembering 1935 when his family got their first tractor, a Fordson

Above: Fish lure made for the Hide-A-While bar, 1990s.

Below: Annual Christmas celebration at the Hide-A-While bar, south of Rock Falls on the Dunn and Pepin County line. The tavern opened in 1963 in a one-room school that had closed the previous year.

During World War II, when he was just out of high school, Don Foiles met his wife at the Rainbow Gardens near Cadott. The dance hall was separated from the liquor bar, and all ages were welcome at the hall. “They had county inspectors that stood right at the door, and I don’t know of anybody ever being turned away because they were too young.... Lots of people would come, families with their small children would come and they were always welcome at those places.”

Country taverns and dance halls took hold in the Chippewa Valley in the nineteenth century. Often featuring local brews and homemade food from nearby farms, these rural institutions also sponsored sports teams, employed area residents as cooks and musicians, and provided venues for wedding dances and other important celebrations. Today, fewer taverns and dance halls are part of the rural landscape, but in 2004 some still thrived as centers where celebrations and traditions help tie the bonds of the rural community.

More so than in some other parts of the country, area ethnic traditions have included alcohol, although not all farm families approved of its use, and there has long been a temperance movement in Wisconsin. Eau Claire writer Waldemar Ager published *Reform*, a Norwegian-language temperance newspaper, from 1896 until he died in 1941.

We used to have Christmas Eve at the house here. Everybody would come on Christmas Eve. But ... the kids kept getting bigger and bigger and more kids, you know, grandkids, and so now we have it over at Club Ten, and we rent the back room.

—Jan Morrow, Cornell, 2000





Interior photographs of Sokup's Tavern, 1950s on Hwy. 53 north of Rice Lake, Barron County. Courtesy of Ralph Sokup.



Teams, Clubs and Associations

My mother was a city girl. But she adapted very well to the farm. She was real involved in everything, and she was a 4-H leader, and she was a woman that could get things done.

— Bernice Sutliff, Menomonie, interviewed 1998, probably speaking about the 1940s

In 1950, Dunn County had 25 Homemaker's Clubs. During the year's program of organized events, more than 150 women learned about making braided rugs, testing water hardness, serving foods rich in vitamins A and C, and understanding soil types. They were charged with passing the information along to non-club members.

Neighbors organized clubs, groups, teams, and associations that were social, recreational, and often educational. In 2000, Eugene Felix of Stanley belonged to the local FFA Alumni and the Friends of the Library Group. "So, we do have certain things that we say are for the community good," said Felix, "but we do it partly to socialize with people, too."

In the first decades of the twentieth century, the Zapadni Ceska Bratrska Jednota (ZCJB) held classes to cultivate the "mother tongue" and to teach English to newer immigrants at the Bohemian Hall north of Cadott. Fraternal members also organized gymnastics for young members. Through the middle part of the century, the Hall held wedding ceremonies, receptions, anniversary celebrations, funerals, birthday and card parties, polka dances, and country, bluegrass, and gospel concerts. The hall fell into disrepair, but a 1999 drive brought new Hall members, and non-member volunteers lent helping hands to restore and preserve the Hall. Since 2000, the building has hosted a "Long Live the Squeeze Box" program, a *jaternice* (sausage) and potato pancake breakfast, and *kolache* classes (*kolache* is a sweet, yeasty bun), among many other events.

Baseball game on Jim Roycraft's farm, late 1920s, near Cadott, Chippewa County. Courtesy of Lois Roycraft Krumenauer.

The boys, I got them started in horseshoe when they were young. The stakes are still out here yet and we are all playing horseshoe yet in a league.... Pretty tough bunch to beat.

— Myron Wathke, Fall Creek, interviewed 2000





Mock wedding of Steve and Rose Najbrt in honor of their thirtieth wedding anniversary, 1934. The event was held at the ZCBJ–Western Bohemian Fraternal Association, Lodge #141, locally known as the Bohemian Hall, near Cadott, Chippewa County. Mock weddings were a common Bohemian tradition. Courtesy of Jeanne Kysilko Andre.