

From: Grafton Historical Society info@graftonareahistory.org
Subject: The Blues in Grafton, Opening Day, and a Rite of Passage in Grafton
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To: tjkrueger1@me.com

DK



Newsletter

MISSION STATEMENT

The Grafton Historical Society is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization founded and operated by volunteers. We are dedicated to the preservation and sharing of Grafton area history.

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Vice President

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John Krueger
Treasurer

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Director

Jim Wegner
Director

Steve Greger
Director

February, 2026

Message from the President

It may be the dead of winter in Wisconsin but the Grafton Historical Society has been “keeping the fire hot” with activity. Last year the GHS put on a record total of six historical program presentations that were attended by a total of 677 persons or an average of 112 persons per program. A **BIG THANK YOU to our host - the Rose-Harms American Legion Post, to our program sponsor – Bank Five Nine** and to all of our members and followers for your interest and many free-will donations. We have already held our first program of 2026 – “The Early Blues in Grafton” held on January 22nd and attended by 91 persons. We are actively planning more for the rest of the year so stay tuned for more news about historical programs to come.

Another endeavor we have been working on over the last half of 2025 is the relocation of GHS archives from the Grafton Public Library basement to a larger and more suitable space, at an affordable cost. At this point, we have finally gotten all the pieces and logistics of this move in order. The historical archives move, although temporary in nature, will be completed before the end of February and should give us a lot more elbow room and working space for the time being.

One last update to report is on the status and progress of the GHS search for building space that would hopefully serve as a future home for the Grafton Historical Society. Many of you may recall that I have reported or referenced this subject multiple times in past issues of this newsletter. It has been a long process

*Darrel Blank
Director*

*Phyllis Wiggins
Director*

*Emily Engstrom
Director*

and our records show we have pursued this dream for almost a full year now. On an optimistic note, through the end of year 2025 we were able to raise more than \$11,000 in cash and/or pledges towards museum space. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to a number of generous donors and especially to the Zaun Foundation that contributed more than half of this total. **THANK YOU AGAIN to all of our GENEROUS DONORS.** The amount represents nearly enough to cover leasing costs through the end of 2026. There are, however, other operating costs to be covered, and our biggest challenge for 2026 is to establish a working budget with sufficient income and support to cover total operating costs for 2027 and beyond.

We remain excited about this possibility, but as noted above, we still have work ahead and will need the help and support of our friends and membership to make this leap forward. I and the GHS board welcome your thoughts and suggestions regarding the prospect of museum space for the Grafton Historical Society.

Working to "Discover, Preserve and Share" Grafton history.

Tom Krueger
GHS President



The Blues Comes to Grafton

Who would have suspected that a farming village with a population of not quite 1,000, on the banks of the Milwaukee River, would become the center of a Blues music explosion that began in

the 1920's. But that's exactly what happened.

Began with the Wisconsin Chair Factory

The Blues in Grafton can trace its roots back to the Wisconsin Chair Factory. The company was founded in 1880 and was a major employer in the area. At one time, it employed one in every six workers in Ozaukee County.

But what does a chair factory have to do with the Blues? Soon the chair factory began to add other types of furniture such as phonograph cabinets to its production. "Pretty quickly the company realized that it could sell more cabinets, if it could also include music, and so it began to branch out into the actual record-making industry," reported Sergio Gonzalez, an associate professor of History at Marquette University. In 1918, Paramount Records was founded as a subsidiary of the chair factory.

"The first records were designed as a bonus that customers would get along with their cabinets," Gonzalez explained, "like a free prize in a box of cereal."

Paramount and Black Swan Records

In the 1920's, Paramount was taking on debt but not much profit. This first music produced in Grafton was aimed at ethnic groups such as German and Scandinavian Americans. To save the company, Paramount began offering to press records for other companies on a contract basis. One of those companies was Black Swan Records. Paramount Records eventually bought out that company and began making so-called "Race Music."

This was at the time that Black residents of the South began moving north to urban areas. They earned money in the industrial North and were able to purchase these records, and it was Blues music that gave Paramount its success. Paramount's race record series began in 1922 with vaudeville Blues songs. The company had a large mail order operation which was key to its early success.

Great Trailblazers of American Sound

But according to Kevin Ramsey, an actor and artist who writes about Paramount Records, "it wasn't just any Blues artists they were producing. They were producing some of the great trailblazers of American sound."

Many great Blues artists travelled to Grafton to record their music. Included in this notable group were Ethel Waters, Ma Rainey, Charlie Patton, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton and Louis Armstrong. Unfortunately, according to Gonzalez, "the vast majority of Paramount's Black musicians never received royalties for their work. Contracts would provide one cent for every 'net' record sale after expenses, but would tack on so many costs that the musicians would end up getting nothing."

Searching the Milwaukee River

The Depression drove many recording companies out of business, including Paramount. It stopped recording in 1932 and closed its doors in 1935. Sadly, there was not much interest in preserving the history of the Blues in Grafton. Paramount sold most of its master recordings as scrap metal. Legend has it that Paramount workers used the leftover records for target practice, tossing them up like clay pigeons. A 2006 episode of the PBS television show "History Detectives" showed divers searching the Milwaukee River for Paramount masters and unsold 78's, but they were unsuccessful.

In all, more than 1600 recordings were done at the Grafton studios. Perhaps not known at the time, but the Blues would go on to be a foundational influence for many future music genres in America, including rock, R & B, jazz and hip hop.



The Mississippi Sheiks

A Family of Musical Powerhouses

The Mississippi Sheiks emerged from the fertile musical soil of the Chatmon family, a sprawling clan of musicians from the Mississippi Delta. The family patriarch, Henderson Chatmon, was a formerly enslaved man who raised children steeped in music—fiddles, guitars, banjos, and the blues.

Among his many children were Lonnie Chatmon – master fiddler; Sam Chatmon – guitarist, singer and storyteller; and Armenter “Bo Carter” Chatmon – guitarist, songwriter, and solo star.

These siblings, along with friends and relatives, formed the rotating lineup that became the Mississippi Sheiks.

Rise to Fame

The Sheiks blended country Blues, string band traditions, ragtime, and early country music.

This fusion made them stand out in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Their sound was polished, danceable, and deeply rooted in Delta life.

Their breakout moment came in 1930 with the release of: “Sitting on Top of the World.” This was a song so iconic it became a standard across genres—covered by everyone from Howlin’ Wolf to Bob Wills to Cream. The Sheiks’ version is spare, haunting, and unforgettable.

What Made Them Special

The Sheiks had a unique sound and they weren’t a fixed band—they were more like a musical collective. Whoever was available played. This kept their sound fresh and adaptable. Between 1930 and 1935, they recorded nearly 100 sides, including: “Stop and Listen Blues”, “Bootlegger’s Blues”, and “Blood in My Eyes”.

Life in the Delta

The Sheiks played at dances, juke joints, plantation parties and traveling shows. Their music reflected the realities of the Depression-era South—hardship, humor, love, betrayal, and survival.

Legacy

Their songs continue to be recorded, studied, and celebrated. In 2009, they were inducted into the Mississippi Musicians Hall of Fame, and tribute albums have kept their legacy alive.

Sam Chatmon, one of the last surviving members, enjoyed a late-life revival during the 1960s folk boom, becoming a beloved figure among blues enthusiasts.





A Rite of Passage in Grafton

Excerpted from "Memoirs of my life in Grafton, Wisconsin, 1941-1967,"

by Gerald "Jerry" E. Mueller, Ph.D.

One of our greatest passions in Grafton—robbing pea trucks—was an annual event that took place in the month of June. In those days, pea vines had to be cut in the field with the pods and fresh peas still attached. Then trucks would haul the cut vines from the field, which were mostly east of Grafton, to the cannery, which was southwest of Grafton in the city of Cedarburg. Upon entering Grafton from the east on Highway 60, the trucks had to make one critical stop—the stop sign at the corner of Highway 60 and 12th Avenue. When this occurred, we would rush out from our hiding place on the side of Riebe Oldsmobile dealership and roll large bundles of vines off the rear of the truck and onto the pavement.

From there, we would gather up the vines and haul them away in a wagon, often to a safe haven where we would gorge ourselves on peas fresh from the pod. Sometimes my friend and I would market the leftover peas in the neighborhood, making a nickel here and there.

Robbing peas is both serious and dangerous business, as drivers often sped up when they saw us approaching, even running the stop sign if necessary to elude us. It is a miracle that none of us was ever seriously injured in this activity. To rob a pea truck was sort of a rite of passage in Grafton.

Our dad never said anything to us to dissuade us from robbing pea trucks, other than to be careful that we didn't get dragged under the wheels of the truck. His lack of admonition for us probably stems from the fact that he and his brothers also robbed peas in their younger days – as early as the 1920's. In his day, the peas were hauled by horse and wagon instead of trucks, and the only resource for the driver was to give the boys an occasional crack with his whip.

YOUR MEMBERSHIP MATTERS

Almost time to renew your membership. Our membership year ends on March 31st. During the month of March, all our members will receive a membership renewal mailing. We hope all of you will renew, or if you're not already a member, will become one. We can't pursue our mission to "Discover, Preserve and Share" Grafton history without you!



The Grafton Historical Society presents:
**THE HISTORY OF
OPENING DAY IN
MILWAUKEE**

Opening day in Milwaukee is an event like no other in baseball. Each opener creates treasured memories. Join us for a presentation that chronicles a half-century of baseball lore, and relive 53 baseball home openers and the traditions, oddball characters, unlikely heroes and Hall of Fame legends they featured.



Matthew Prigge is a freelance author and historian from Milwaukee and the host of "What

March 12th

6:00 p.m.

**Rose Harms
Legion Post
1540 13th Avenue
Grafton**

**Free and open to the
public.**

**Suggested \$5 donation at the
door.**

**Refreshments and
Cash Bar**

**GRAFTON HISTORICAL
SOCIETY**

Facebook:



Made Milwaukee Famous," a weekly local history segment on WMSE 91.7. His work has been featured in both local and national publications and has won multiple awards.

Grafton Historical Society of WI

Website:
www.graftonareahistory.org

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info@graftonareahistory.org



Bluesmen Entertain in Grafton

Bluesmen Peter Roller and Steve Cohen entertained an enthusiastic crowd during the Grafton Historical Society presentation on the Blues in Grafton. Roller, a guitarist, teacher, author and prolific player in the Milwaukee music scene, explained the role of Paramount Records in the history of the Blues. He also talked about the many Blues artists who travelled to Grafton to record at the Wisconsin Chair Factory, under the Paramount label, and the

incredible influence of the Blues on many other music genres through the decades.



A HUGE THANK YOU to member Matt Zipter and board member Jim Wegner for braving the cold at the Grafton Christmas parade to carry the GHS banner. They announced our GHS "Blues" truck, complete with music and large cutouts of Blues artists.





Christmas Tree Ship-A Tragic History

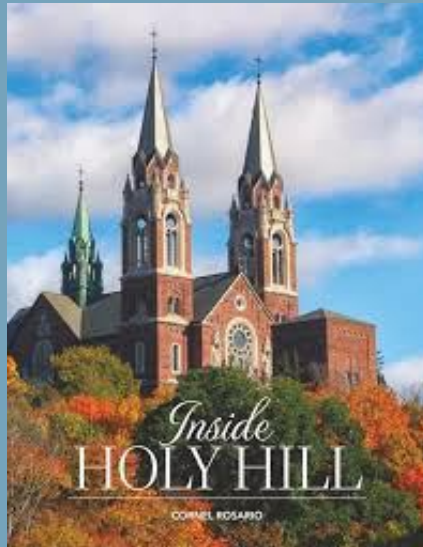
The Christmas tree ship was the topic of a GHS presentation in December by Rochelle Pennington, award-winning columnist and bestseller author.

More than 100 people heard the moving story of the Rouse Simmons, the original "Christmas Tree Ship" that sailed from Wisconsin to Chicago at the beginning of the holiday season for more than 30 years in the early 1900's. The ship was a three-masted schooner, easily recognized by waiting crowds when they saw a Christmas tree tied to her main mast and her deck loaded with as many as 30,000 Christmas trees. The ship tragically sunk in a violent storm on Lake Michigan in 1912.



Jill Bertrand, pictured here, is one of two winners of the artwork entitled, "Eminent Disaster" at the GHS presentation on the Christmas Tree Ship. It is a depiction of the last moments of the Rouse Simmons, the legendary "Christmas Tree Ship" that travelled from Door County to Chicago to bring Christmas trees to the waiting crowds. The artwork was done by local artist Henry A. Klapproth, Sr.

Sincere thanks to the Ozaukee County Historical Society for donating two copies of the artwork to the GHS.



The History of Holy Hill

The history of Holy Hill will be the topic of a presentation on Monday, February 16th at 6:00 p.m. at the Grafton Public Library. The program includes a description of the present-day Basilica, chapels and grounds. Learn about the Carmelite Order, a friar's typical day, and the cures that have been reported following visits to Holy Hill. The program is free and open to the public.

DO YOU KNOW?

With this issue we'd like to continue our "Mystery Item" feature. If you have an idea what this item might be contact us at:

info@graftonareahistory.org.

If you have an item that you need help identifying and would like to submit it for a future newsletter edition, we'd be happy to include it.



DID YOU KNOW?

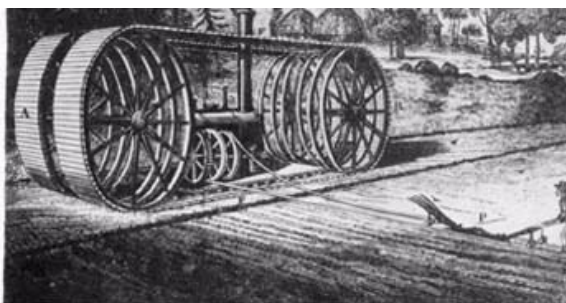
This **Mystery Item** from the last issue of



our Newsletter was ...

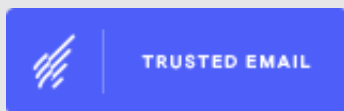
An Early Tractor

Early tractors emerged in the late 19th century as steam-powered traction engines, into gasoline-powered machines around 1892. These early, often heavy, machines replaced horses, leading to mass production with the 1917 Fordson tractor, which revolutionized farming by being affordable, smaller, and very efficient.



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