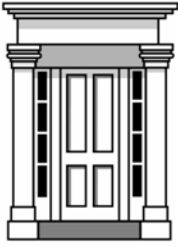


SHEBOYGAN COUNTY



HISTORICAL  
RESEARCH  
CENTER

**Coming Soon**

**New books for  
the Holidays**

**The Chordettes  
by  
Scott Lewandoske**

**The Chordettes  
of Sheboygan**



**Camp Haven**

# The Researcher

**The Newsletter of the Sheboygan County  
Historical Research Center**

Volume XXV Number 1 October 2019

*The Researcher is sponsored by Jay Christopher of Christopher Farm & Gardens.*

## A HISTORICAL LOOK AT THE PIGEON RIVER



The Pigeon River is one of the largest rivers in Sheboygan County. It begins with two tributaries; 1) The Meeme River flows out of Pigeon Lake (northwest of Osman, southeast of St. Nazianz) in Manitowoc County and south through Spring Valley, and 2) The Pigeon River comes out of Horseshoe Lake, also located in Manitowoc County, it meets the Meeme River northwest of the intersection of Rangeline and County Line Roads, north of the Manitowoc/Sheboygan County Line.

From there the river travels south on its way to Lake Michigan and is called the Pigeon River. The river was originally known as Meeme or Meeme Sibi in the Ojibwa language; Meeme means pigeon and Sibi or see-be means river. It was most likely named that by the native people because of an extensive wild pigeon roost in the area.

Once the most plentiful land bird on earth it went from abundance to extinction in a period of about fifty years.

Cont. page 4

The Sheboygan County Historical Research Center is located at 518 Water Street in Sheboygan Falls.

Open Tuesday through Friday, 9:00am – 4:00pm and Saturdays from 9:00am to 12:00 noon.

Closed Saturday, October 19, Saturday, November 2, 2019 and Thursday, November 28, 2019 for Thanksgiving.

Phone: 920-467-4667

E-mail: [research@schrc.org](mailto:research@schrc.org)

Website: [schrc.org](http://schrc.org)

**The Researcher** is the official newsletter of the Sheboygan County Historical Research Center, 518 Water Street, Sheboygan Falls, Wisconsin 53085.

It is published six times per year in August, October, December, February, April and June.

The Research Center is the local history archive for Sheboygan County and areas surrounding the county. It is a repository for paper records of all kinds.

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## **2019 SCHRC Program Schedule**

All programs are open to the public. Most are free of charge.  
See [schrc.org](http://schrc.org) and our Facebook page for more information

### **The Lincoln Lectures - The Lincoln Douglas Debates**

Tuesdays, October 1, 8, 22, 29

Sheboygan County Historical Museum

3110 Erie Avenue, Sheboygan, Wisconsin

6:30pm to 8:30pm

### **Black Hawk War Symposium**

Saturday, November 2, 2019 9:00am to 3:00pm

Plymouth Arts Center

**\$50 fee Register online at [schrc.org](http://schrc.org), call SCHRC or send in the registration.**

### **Genealogy Classes**

518 Water Street, Sheboygan Falls

1:00pm to 3:00pm \$15 members, \$20 non-members

Monday, November 11, 2019 Exciting DNA Updates for Genealogy **KIEL PUBLIC LIBRARY 7:00PM (Free of Charge)**

Monday, November 11, 2019 Using Ancestry.com and Family Search (location to be announced)

~~Monday, December 9, 2019 Mastering Online Newspapers Resources~~  
**Rescheduled for April 13, 2020**

### **Second Saturdays— Journeys Into Local History**

Plymouth Arts Center, 520 East Mill Street, Plymouth

9:30am to 11:30am

November 9, 2019 - Jerry Apps - The Quiet Season: Remembering Country Winters  
December 14, 2019 - John Eastberg - Over the top with Milwaukee Victorians

### **History on the Move**

**Generations**, 1500 Douglas Drive, Plymouth

2:00pm to 3:30pm

Wednesday, November 6, 2019

~~Wednesday, December 4, 2019~~

Sheboygan County's Historic Indian Mounds  
~~The Kettle Moraine, Mitchell and Greenbush~~  
**Rescheduled for April 1, 2020**

### **History on the Move**

**Oostburg** Public Library, 213 North 8th Street

1:00 to 2:30pm

Thursday, November 14, 2019

~~Thursday, December 12, 2019~~

Century Farms and Historic Properties  
~~Lakeshore History~~  
**Rescheduled for April 9, 2020**

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## North to Alaska

In October 1867 the United States grew exponentially in size when it bought the territory of Alaska from the Russians. For \$7.2 million dollars (\$121 million today) the country acquired 586,412 square miles of land, land more than twice the size of Texas, for less than 2 cents an acre.

In spite of the great bargain, the American citizenry was less than enthusiastic. They believed the land to be unproductive and worthless. The land purchase was christened "Seward's Folly" after William Seward, President Andrew Johnson's hard-hitting Secretary of State who had negotiated the deal with Russia. Yet, when gold was discovered in a tributary of the Klondike River in 1896 public opinion turned more favorable. Alaska might just be a land of promise.

In 1934, Alaska again became a land of promise, when as part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal plan to help move the United States out of the Great Depression a number of rural rehabilitation colonies were established. Matanuska Valley Colony at Palmer, Alaska was one of those. It originally consisted of 203 families who bought tracts of land from a 260,000 acre parcel. Families from Minnesota, Wisconsin and Michigan were recruited because of the similarity in climate and the extremely high percentage of residents on federal relief. The Great Depression hit hard in the Upper Midwest

Families were offered 40 acres of land, a barn, house and equipment to settle the valley and farm the land. These "gifts" were to be paid back over a 30-year period beginning in 1938.

Four families from Sheboygan County- the Gus Scheibel family, Sheboygan Falls; the John Herman family, Plymouth; the Edgar Carmen family, Elkhart Lake; and the Burton Gessler family of Sheboygan Falls left to join the colony in May 1935.

The Minnesota and Michigan contingents were the first group of settlers to arrive at Matanuska along with the crew of builders for the settlement. Wisconsin colonists arrived two weeks later. All were transported across the United States by train to Seattle and then by boat to Seward, Alaska.

Wisconsin people, 353 in all, departed from Green Bay by train. Along the route, the colonists were treated like royalty. Arriving in Seattle each was given a red ribbon printed "Wisconsin to Alaska" and a blue one which said "Matanuska Pioneers."

On May 18, the colonists boarded the ship, *St. Michael*. It carried 573 passengers, a full crew, 3,600 tons of freight, 48 dogs, 4 ducks, 2 cats and one canary. There were also four school buses, flooring, roofing and 7,000 tons of freight for the colonists. On May 22 the ship docked at Seward.

Although homes and barns were supposed to have been built, they were not. Families spent their first months in Alaskan in tents. Some of the colonists left immediately upon arrival in the Valley. By March 1939, 537 people in 124 families, or 61 percent, were gone. In 1949, only 63 families, about one third of the original colonists, were still living in the valley.

Advance planning was poor. Many of the basics needed for the community were missing, with no electricity, little water, no churches and no schools. Yet, planners in Washington decided that each farm family should have a modern milking machine. Two hundred machines were shipped, and of course, charged to each family, but they sat unused due to lack of electricity.

Within weeks of the arrival in Alaska, there was a measles epidemic that spread throughout the colony. With no permanent houses or hospitals, and though only a few settlers died, the event was disheartening and foreshadowed the difficulties of living in a remote area. The harsh conditions took their toll on the settlers. In 1965, there were only 20 families left.

Trial and error taught the farmers which crops would grow during the short Alaskan season of almost total daylight. Potatoes, turnips, barley, cabbage, squash and many species of flowers flourished and grew to great size. One story is told of a man wanting to buy five pounds of potatoes. The grocer humorously replied that he would not cut a potato in half for anyone.

Currently, the town of Palmer, Alaska, located just northeast of Wasilla, is home to many of the descendants of the settlers. Original structures from the colony are a part of the Alaska State Fairgrounds. Although not a booming success, the colony did help develop the Matanuska Valley into a primary agriculture region within Alaska.

In America's last frontier, the dream of opportunity and prosperity was a disappointment for many, but for others it was a hard won victory that set them on the road to success. Whether a success or failure, it must have been quite an adventure for the four families from Sheboygan County.

More on pages 6, 7, 8





## History Along the Pigeon River Corridor

When Europeans began exploring North America in the 17th and 18th centuries historians estimate there were 3 to 5 billion passenger pigeons. The largest recorded nesting was in Wisconsin in 1871. A conservative estimate of the nesting area was 850 square miles, and estimates put the number of nesting pigeons at 136 million. With as many as 100 nests in a tree, the weight sometimes caused branches to fall off and trees to collapse.

So what happened? Overhunting, logging, loss of habitat - oaks for their acorns, squab became a delicacy in the East, the invention of the refrigerated rail car and the use of the telegraph, and that fact that each pigeon laid only one egg per year. The last live bird seen in Sheboygan County, as noted in a diary entry, was in the town of Mitchell in the 1880s.

As the Pigeon River moves south it encounters the settlement of Spring Valley, an unincorporated community in the Town of Meeme, Manitowoc County, Section 14. Further south we find the rural area of Meeme with its school and historic post office and voting building, now at Manitowoc Historical Society.

Next the river encounters Edwards, which is located on Highway 42 in the town of Herman, just south of the Manitowoc County line. Established Aug. 31, 1854, its post office was discontinued Mar. 31, 1902; first postmaster Edward Neuhaus, for whom the burg was named.

Further south we find Howards Grove and Millersville. Located in the Town of Herman, named after Henry Howard, proprietor of Howard's Hotel and the first postmaster, the history of the community dates back to 1846 when the first immigrants found their way along the Pigeon River and settled in the area.

At first the two settlements were known as Howards and Mueller Villa. It was also known as Pitchville, derived from the German word, Pech, meaning pitch or cobbler's wax. At one time many of the settlers were either shoemakers (Schumachers) by name or trade.

The Pigeon River enters Howards Grove from the north with it running parallel to Hwy 42 and then Wisconsin Drive, running the entire length of the village out of town to the south turning southeast south of Playbird Road towards Sheboygan Falls.

Fisher Creek enters the Pigeon River just north of Millersville Avenue in the village.

After crossing Cty Rd J the Pigeon River snakes its way around Town and Country Golf Course. Opened in 1963 with 18 holes, 147 acres in size, today it's a 27-hole public golf course in the Town of Sheboygan Falls. Town and Country was one of the first public courses in Sheboygan County.

The Pigeon River turns east and crosses Cty Y, winding its way around the Kohler Windway property. Windway is a historic residential property located north of Kohler, Wisconsin. It was built in 1937-1938 by Walter J. Kohler, Jr., future governor of Wisconsin and an executive of the Kohler Company.

Kohler commissioned architect William Deknatel, who had been an apprentice to Frank Lloyd Wright in the early 1930s, to design the house.



Historic Windway is a two-story masonry building in the International Style, with Wrightian influences.

Further down river we find Pine Hills Country Club. Officially named the Sheboygan Country Club, it was founded in 1905 and incorporated in 1909. When it moved to its present location in the late 1920s some members sought to change its name. Pine Hills was selected in a contest, but the new name never was formally adopted. Edward Hammett coined the name. The course had a grand opening in the spring of 1930.

Further east, the Pigeon River bisects Maywood. In 1974, Elwood H. May (President of Mayline) willed 120 acres of natural area straddling the Pigeon River (Mayland Farm) to the city of Sheboygan on the condition that the property be maintained and open to the public so people of all ages could experience a natural area for study and recreation. (Ideas for use included a rec park or golf course) In 1980, the Elwood H. May Environmental Park was formed and in 1983, the association, a 501 (c) 3 corporation was started to administer the property. Today Maywood offers programs and events to upwards of 12,000 people, and is Sheboygan's largest park.

Onward we find Evergreen Park constructed in 1934 as part of one of FDR's CWA (Civil Works Administration) programs. George Cole, pioneer settler, purchased the land in October of 1872. (B. 1828 New York) The land contained one of the largest stands of native pines in the area and Cole would not permit any of them to be cut down. After Cole's death in 1910, the land was kept intact until the city of Sheboygan bought 70 acres on July 29, 1912 for \$14,000. In 1936, 30 additional acres were purchased. On September 5, 1918, the land, originally named Pine Woods was renamed Evergreen Park.

Back in the day, the Pigeon River was one of the local spots where young and old would go "crabbing".

Many of the beautiful buildings in Sheboygan were built by Roth & Schwartz with limestone from their quarry, today's Sheboygan Quarry. The limestone taken from the site was also crushed into fine gravel and used to pave many of the city streets. The demand for lime and limestone declined, and by 1935 the quarry was no longer in operation. After operations ceased, and the water seeping into the quarry was no longer being pumped out, the excavation slowly filled with water until it reached its present level.

As the river heads toward Lake Michigan it once powered the Beekman Cole Mill, watered the area around Pigeon River School, was a fishing hotspot to hundreds of smelt fishermen and was nearly home to a utopian community. Native Americans once frequently fished the area around the mouth of the river.

Interestingly, at times a sand bar actually blocks the river from draining, until a storm of some sort clears the mouth. A beautiful river, it is lined with interesting history.



# Alaskan Correspondent Tells Of Plymouth Girl's Wedding; Other Items Sent From Palmer

By HARRY M. CAMPBELL

Palmer, Alaska, Feb. 21.—Dan Cupid shot one of his arrows into the valley and as a result Betty Herman, 19-year-old daughter of John Herman of Plymouth, Wis., was united in marriage to Matt Onkka, 21 years old, of Bruce Crossing, Mich.

This was the first colonist couple to wed. The ceremony was performed at 9 p. m. February 7, by the Rev. B. J. Bingle at the home of the groom. Jack Herman, chief of the colonial police, presented the bride and the attendants were Betty's brother, Fred (Fritz), and Dorothy Onkka.

The bride's gown, all green, and the bridesmaid in peacock blue made a striking appearance.

Many young friends of the couple were present at the nuptials and later joined the newlyweds who presided for the first time as host and hostess at a table. During the dinner an announcement from Radio Station KFQD at Anchorage, Alaska, about the newlyweds was heard followed by a musical selection which was played and dedicated to them.

Later the colony's new orchestra comprised of the Rev. Father Suizman, saxophone; Jack Herman, guitar, and a Mr. Laakkos, piano-accordion, furnished music for dancing.

Among the guests present were Ross Sheely, present general manager of the ARRC, and his assistant, Don L. Irwin; Mrs. Irwin and daughter, Inabelle, Gust Schiebels of Sheboygan county and "Bellowing" Bill Taylor, the colonial plumber.

This marriage was as much of a surprise to the couple's many friends here as it doubtless will be to their friends in the States.

Betty and June Herman were contestants for the recent "Beauty Queen" contest for "Miss Palmer," who will compete for "Miss Alaska" at the Fairbanks Ice Carnival in March. Betty had to leave the contest just prior to its closing, and although she did not win in the beauty race she did win a husband and "That," said Betty, "means a lot."

Matt now being a head of a family is eligible to join the colony and has been granted a tract of land under the same conditions as colonists heretofore.

The entire valley extended its congratulations to Betty and Matt.

The new hospital, which, by the way, is the finest in the territory, is now one of the busiest places in town. The head physician and the

entire hospital staff are on the go day and night. The American Red Cross nurse who makes the rounds of homes in the valley will conduct a school of "first aid" and "home nursing" with two two-hour classes each week for 15 weeks.

The extension department of the university is conducting classes in home economics, and information came from Fairbanks that the extension service expects to open an office here in March. There will be a home demonstration agent and an agricultural agent assigned to the work exclusively in the valley. Miss Ruth Peck of Wisconsin will have charge of the home demonstration work.

The new Palmer post office with its many combination boxes replaces the old system of waiting in line for mail and is popular with the colonists and old settlers because it reduces their chances of missing a ride back to their homes after they transact their business.

A President's Birthday Ball was held in the new Community hall Saturday, February 22. Music was furnished of the colony's own orchestra with one of the school teachers at the piano. Transportation was furnished and many from Anchorage were present.

Gust Schiebel has been having a hard time trying to dry up his new cow. Bill Taylor, the colonial plumber, suggested that he see Anton Anderson about it, because Anton didn't have any trouble in drying up his well. Incidentally, neither did any of us have any trouble over that.

There has been a series of meetings held in the valley for the purpose of a co-operative association for the benefit of the colonists and old settlers, as well.

In keeping with the modern rhythm, I, Harry M. Campbell, lost a part of one of the fingers on my left hand from the car whose fan "goes 'round and 'round."



Above: Some 200 families from the barren farmlands of Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota chose FDR's 1935 New Deal challenge to relaunch their lives in Alaska as farmers. They became the hope of a nation wracked by the Great Depression in what reporters called a "socialist experiment."

Those families settled north of Anchorage near Palmer, Alaska.

## Notice --- Caucus

### Town of Sheboygan Falls

Notice is hereby given that the annual caucus for the Town of Sheboygan Falls for the election of candidates for the various offices will be held in the Town Hall on Saturday, March 21, 1936, at 1:30 P. M.

#### Caucus Committee:

Ernst Dassow,  
Louis Boeger,  
Julius Kuhlow

At left:  
Sheboygan Press  
Tuesday, March 17, 1936





Colonists arrive at Matanuska Valley, Alaska on May 10, 1935.

A permanent farm from settlers in Alaska, 1940.





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