# RESEARCHER

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SHEBOYGAN COUNTY HISTORICAL RESEARCH CENTER

**Volume XXXIV Number 5 June 2024** 

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

### **Did You Know?**

Elwood Torke founded Torke Coffee in Sheboygan in 1941 with the help of his father, Adolph, who owed the Sheboygan Coffee Co. They delivered hand—roasted coffee with a horse and buggy. The company is now run by the 4th generation.





1960 ad

Do you know some historical "tidbits" about Sheboygan and Wisconsin? Would you like to share them with our readers? Email to richardstoelb@schrc.org; put "Did You Know?" in the subject line.

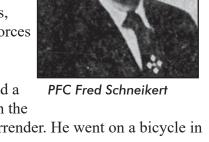
### Nazi Rocket Scientists Surrendered to a Sheboygan Man in 1945

By Gary C. Klein

The Soviet Union could have been the first to step foot on the moon if Sheboygan's Fred Schneikert wasn't on guard duty to accept the surrender of a group of German scientists in the waning days of World War II.

In May 1945, with Adolph Hitler already dead in his bunker, both American and Soviet Union forces focused on obtaining German technology with the defeat of Nazi Germany.

A group of German scientists led by Wernher von Braun realized the war was ending. The scientists decided it would be better to be captured by Americans than the Soviets, according to an article in Air and Space Forces magazine.



Magnus von Braun, Wernher's brother, had a PFC Fred Schneikert better handle on the English language than the famed scientist and was drafted for the surrender. He went on a bicycle in search of American troops.

continued on page 4



518 Water Street
Sheboygan Falls, WI 53085
Open Tuesday through Friday
9 am to 4 pm
(920) 467–4667
schrc.org • research@schrc.org



The Researcher is the official newsletter of the Sheboyaan County Historical Research Center, 518 Water Street, Sheboygan Falls, WI 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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View our online media!

### **Welcome New Members**

Robert & Mia McMillan — Plymouth Charles Berth — Green Bay Bret Blizzard — Sheboygan Falls Elizabeth Abler — Plymouth Sheboygan County YMCA — Sheboygan Emily Rauwerdink — Sheboygan Falls

### **Program Schedule**

### **Gravestone Cleaning Workshops**

Saturdays, 9 am to 10 am

Please register by calling (920) 467-4667.

July 20 – St. Luke Lutheran Church Cemetery, N6193 State Highway 32, Sheboygan Falls

August 24 - Hingham Cemetery, County Road CC, Hingham

September 14 - Farmin Cemetery, on Highway 28 approximately four miles west of Sheboygan Falls

October 5 – Waldo Cemetery, 209 High Street, Waldo

### **History on the Move**

at Generations, 1500 Douglas Drive, Plymouth — 1 pm Tuesday, July 9 – Lyndon Baptist Church & Lyndon Cemetery presented by Dan

Tuesday, August 13 – Peach Crates & Comic Books presented by Rich Dykstra

#### **Book Club**

at 517 Monroe Street, Sheboygan Falls – 1 to 2:30 pm Thursday, July 25 – Touching History: The Untold Story of the Drama That Unfolded in the Skies Over America on 9/11 (2008) by Lynn Spencer. Please register by calling (920) 467-4667.

#### **Taproom History - Presidential Disability and Mortality**

at Racer's Hall, W4408 County Road C, Plymouth - 6:30 pm Presented by Steven Rogstad

Thursday, June 27 – James Garfield's Slow and Cruel Death

Thursday, July 18 - Grover Cleveland's Secret Surgery

Thursday, August 15 – Woodrow Wilson's Paralytic Stroke

### **Annual Meeting**

at Amore, 18 W Mill St., Plymouth – 11 am to 1 pm Friday, October 11 – Stephen Kantrowitz presents How the Ho Chunk Thwarted Removal from Wisconsin

### Lincoln Seminar - Lincoln and the Occult

Location to be determined – 6:30 to 8:30 pm

Presented by Steven Rogstad

Tuesday, October 8 – Abraham and Mary Lincoln's Psychologies of Death

Tuesday, October 15 – Spiritualism and Seances in the White House

Tuesday, October 22 – Dreams, Omens, Portents, and Ghosts

Tuesday, October 29 – The Plot to Steal Lincoln's Corpse



The sacrifice our Ancestors gave yesterday, gave us today and our tomorrow.

### Let's Develop Our Center

I am happy to report that the Center's spring activities and events are operating at full vigor, and have attracted an incredible number of attendees. We just completed our Saloon Stories program series on the history of car racing in Sheboygan County. An unprecedented 400 persons came to the four sessions! Thanks goes out to Mary and Jim Parrish for organizing and hosting the series this year.

**Taproom History begins** Thursday, June 27, and will focus on presidential disability and mortality. I will be discussing the medical cases of James Garfield, Grover Cleveland, and Woodrow Wilson. I am also excited to announce that Taproom has a new venue this summer. We will be meeting at Racer's Hall & Charcoal Grill at W4408 County Road C in Plymouth. They are providing a buffet of great food for our audiences at a nominal price, so I hope you will come early and have supper before the program.



They are excited about the Center bringing programs to their establishment, so let us show them how much we appreciate them!

Also, please remember that we are still in the midst of our 2024 Annual Campaign. You should have received a letter this past April. Our supporters have stepped to the plate and are providing donations that will make a difference as we expand our facilities and increase our capabilities to enhance our collection care/management processes. Please make your donation to the Research Center today. You can do it easily through the website or by sending it to the Center. Thank you for allowing us to continue the rich tradition of preserving Sheboygan County history!

2024 is our "Year of the Volunteer." Non-profit organizations often circulate a "wish list" of goods and services it needs. I want to encourage our members and supporters to volunteer their service in the form of janitorial, gardening, and collection processing. Volunteers can pick your own days and hours. So, please keep the Center in mind and spread the word. Please call the Center at 920-467-4667 to volunteer or to learn about volunteer activities that may suit you.

You may remember that we put out a call on social media for artificial Christmas trees, which were used for our 2022 Treemendous Celebration. We were given over 75 trees! Now we are need of nice perennial plants to place around our new building at 517 Monroe Street in the Falls. Do you have some you could donate from your garden? Please think of us if you are separating or splitting plants this summer. We need some! Please drop them off with your name, so we can thank you.

We have officially moved into the former Mersberger Financial Group building behind the Center, where several work stations are now available for volunteer activities, and where the scanning lab has been relocated. Stop by for a tour!

Keep checking the SCHRC website – www.schrc.org – for updates.

As always, thank you for all you do to support and help develop our Research Center!

Sincerely,

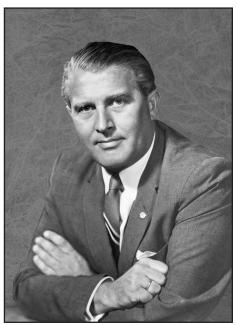
Steven K. Rogstad Executive Director

steverogstad@schrc.org

Schneikert, a private first class with the U.S. Army's 44th Infantry Division who was fluent in German, was on guard duty in a ditch when a German approached him on a bicycle. Schneikert said in German: "Halt! Komme vorwarts mit die hande hoch!," which means "Stop! Come forward with your hands up!"

Magnus von Braun obeyed the order. He was the brother of Wernher, the German inventor of V–2 rockets. This encounter would begin the surrender of the famed rocket man Wernher von Braun, along with more than 100 of his scientist colleagues.

Schneikert, who attended Holy Name grade school and Sheboygan High School, was at first skeptical in the encounter and said to his fellow soldiers, "Hey, I've got a nut here. What should I do with him?"



Wernher von Braun (1912–1977) was one of the most important rocket developers and champions of space exploration in the 20th century. PROVIDED BY NASA



Magnus von Braun, left, Pfc. Frederick P. Schneikert, middle, and Wernher von Braun, right, pose in 1945, following the two von Braun scientists surrender to the U.S. Army at the end of World War II. Schneikert, a Sheboygan man who was on guard duty when a German approached him on a bicycle, spoke to Magnus and eventually took Magnus and Wernher into U.S. custody. U.S. ARMY ARCHIVES

Schneikert, after the war, became a polyphase meter man for Wisconsin Power and Light. Former co—worker Ron Navis of Sheboygan Falls recalled he was a modest man who was one of the few German—speaking American soldiers at the time, which allowed him to fully understand what Magnus von Braun was saying to him. Navis thinks if it were anyone else, that man would have likely been shot.

Wernher von Braun was head of the V–2 rocket development team. The rocket was used in the twilight hours of World War II. The rocket wizard was quoted in a 1952 Press clipping that if Germany had two more years on development of a V–2 rocket bomb, the outcome of the war could have been different.

After the group was detained by

the U.S. troops, Pfc. Schneikert was assigned to guard the group for the next two weeks, according to a 1985 Sheboygan Press clipping announcing his death. He forged friendships with the scientists and, in particular, scientist von Braun, which would last a lifetime. Von Braun would stop in Sheboygan to visit Schneikert and invite Schneikert to a rocket launch in the 1960s.

Von Braun and his cadre of scientists were fearful of being dragged to the U.S., then sent back to Germany, which worried many of the group. It was decided by the government to offer guaranteed long—term employment to those who settled in the U.S.

According to the NASA website, as part of a military operation called Project Paperclip, he and an initial group of 125 scientists were sent to America to Fort Bliss, Texas. There, they worked on U.S. Army rockets and assisted in V–2 launches at the White Sands Proving Ground in New Mexico.

In 1950, von Braun's team moved to Redstone Arsenal near Huntsville, Alabama, to continue their missile work.

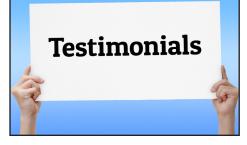
Von Braun became an advocate for space exploration during the 1950s. He eventually became part

of NASA, where he became the chief architect of the Saturn V launch vehicle, the super booster that would send Americans to the moon.

Schneikert married Erna Steffen of Fond du Lac in 1940. Following the war, he lived a quiet life working and later spending his retirement years in Largo, Florida. Erna died in 1975, and Schneikert married Peggy MacDonald of Sheboygan in 1976. Peggy died in 1982, and Schneikert came back to

Sheboygan in 1985.
Schneikert, who died in 1985
at age 75, was a member of the
Jensen-Van Thruler Chapter 15 of
Disabled American Veterans and
of Sheboygan Memorial Post 9156
Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Gary C. Klein can be reached at (920) 453–5149 or gklein@ gannett.com. Follow him on X (formerly Twitter) at @leicaman99.



### Members of the DeCapa Five respond to the article "Hootenanny" in the April 2024 issue of *The Researcher*

"Wow! We are famous again (at least to anyone who reads the article and the extras). Lots of great memories and so happy to see we are all still the DeCapa family." — Mike Pungercar

"Richard, THANK YOU for all you did to make this article a wonderful walk back into our DeCapa history! I am pretty sure that I can speak for all of us when I say that we are truly honored. It brings back so many memories, huge smiles, and deep gratitude for all that we shared while we were still just teenagers. You and John brought it all back to life! THANK YOU! THANK YOU! THANK YOU!" — Chris Ealing

"OMG! I finally figured out how to open the QR code! For the second time since I started this project with Richard, I had tears in my eyes. I had no idea just how much Richard was going to include in the article. I was astounded and moved by all his care and understanding of our group and the times we had lived in. I know Richard talked about all those things (over a period of probably 9 months), but I had no idea he was planning to use it all! This goes without saying . . . thank you, Richard, from the bottom of my heart. You truly did an amazing job! You have gone above and beyond." — John Ott

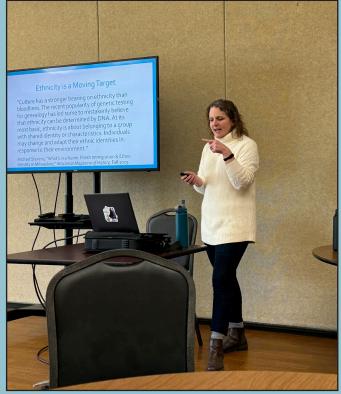
"Richard, the hard copy versions of The Researcher arrived today and I took great [misty-eyed] delight in rereading the entire piece. I am so grateful to you for the careful and care-filled research you did for us and for all who will read this piece. Of course, no one outside the DeCapas will ever match the level of appreciation the group of us are priviledged to share, thanks to you. As a group of high school teens, we were priviledged to have a truly unique adventure which resulted in a lifelong bond that few other people will ever experience or even understand. Your fine work has inspired a personal fantasy. I wonder if Mike might be moved to write "The DeCapa Story" as his third book; a non-fiction collection which would include "insider" anecdotes from the original group members. And just maybe, the fantasy continues, we could ask a guy by the name of Richard Stoleb, to write the foreward!" — Ron Klusmeier





Above: The April session of Saloon Stories drew a record crowd. Over 150 people enjoyed listening to Jerry Mueller's recollections of running a NASCAR team from 1983 to 1993. Photos courtesy of Elaine Mueller. Below left: Racing Announcer/Author Joe Verdegan entertains the crowd at Chris & Sue's during the May session of Saloon Stories. Below right: Dana Kelly, Executive Director of the Norwegian American Genealogical Center in Madison, presented "DNA:101" at our spring genealogy seminar held at Generations in April.















Above: Eight volunteers cleaned 14 gravestones at the Sheboygan Falls Cemetery. Below left: Three volunteers at the Waldo Cemetery gravestone cleaning workshop discovered they all had relatives buried in the small community of Calumet, Michigan. Pictured left to right: Bonnie Clark, Philip Muehlberger, and Ann Keckonen. Below right: Volunteers cleaned 14 gravestones at the Waldo Cemetery.







Thank you to the following individuals for their recent donations:

Richard & Janice Stoelb – purchased new microwave for Mersberger building

Marge Giesen – purchased work–station furniture and conference table for Mersberger building

Deb Harder – performed gardening duties outside Mersberger building

Mary Parrish – made a new front door sign for Millhouse building

GRAVESTONE CLEANING WORKSHOP PRESENTED BY THE SHEBOYGAN COUNTY HISTORICAL RESEARCH CENTER



Join the Sheboygan County Historical Research Center for a gravestone cleaning workshop where you will learn how to properly clean gravestones.

- Please register by
   calling (920) 467-4667 or
   scanning the QR code or
- https://bit.ly/gravestone-cleaning

Workshop is limited to 12 participants



All cleaning supplies will be provided.

Participants must be able to kneel and/or sit on the ground. There are a limited number of stones that may be cleaned while standing.

Please come prepared to get dirty – wear comfortable clothing!

#### Supplies you need to provide:

- Waterproof gloves or gardening gloves
- · Kneeling pad
- · Safety glasses (optional)

Location: St. Luke Lutheran Church Cemetery, N6193 State Hwy 32 Sheboygan Falls 9 AM SATURDAY, July 20, 2024

### Sheboygan County Historical Research Center Welcomes New Treasurer, Kevin Widder



We welcome Kevin Widder to the Board as the SCHRC's new Treasurer! He has had a distinguished career in entrepreneurship in Sheboygan County. He held numerous positions with Pemco, Inc., involving assembly, sales, purchasing, operations, engineering and eventually President. He was President of Automatan, Inc., for 11 years, and owner of Feldmann Engineering & Manufacturing Co., from 2019–2023.

He currently provides business consulting services as CEO of Crystal View, LLC, with a focus on financial competence, sales management, acquisition integration, international management, and market adaptation to generate organic growth. He enjoys skiing, travel, the Packers and Brewers, and spending time with his family and faith community.

### Sheboygan County Historical Research Center Welcomes New Board Member, Angela Miller



Angela, who has a master's degree in history from the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and degrees in history and humanities from the University of Wisconsin–Green Bay, joined Kohler Co. as its first full–time historian in 2004.

Angela is driven to explore the company's deep history and uncover new insights, lessons, stories and characters that have shaped Kohler Co., the Village of Kohler and beyond. Her passion for history has resulted in ongoing growth and recognition for KOHLER Archives, elevating awareness for the collection and encouraging collaboration between the Archives and other departments like New Product Development.

From Oostburg, Wisconsin, Angela and her husband have two sons. Together, they enjoy playing and watching sports, especially golf, and traveling.



### At what age and how did you get interested in local history?

I was always interested in history. Presidents and First Ladies were my first love. Both of my parents are also very much interested in local and family history so it was always a topic of conversation — and still is. After an Irish reunion, when I was about 18, is when I caught the bug fullbore.

### What are your favorite Sheboygan County topics to research and/or write about?

I like it all. Business and building research. Family research. Land Records.

### How long have you worked at the Research Center and how did you get your start here?

I started at the SCHRC cleaning, painting the fence, and helping with the Trash and Treasure sale 26 or so years ago but have been an employee for 17 years.

### What notable "surprises" have you uncovered while doing research?

The number of people who disappeared and started over in another city with a new family surprises me every time. I still marvel at Sheboygan County's reach in the world . . . generators powering Antarctica, numerous ties to the White House.

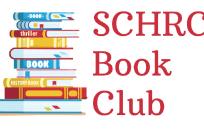
### What has been your greatest research victory?

There have been too many to count. Helping our visitors and volunteers find the answers they've heard about or wondered, sometimes for their entire lives, is as exciting to me as it is to them. Watching their excitement is so much fun.

### What is your favorite part of the job?

I love a mystery! The hunt for the information is my favorite part of the research process. Sharing the information with the public is great, too.





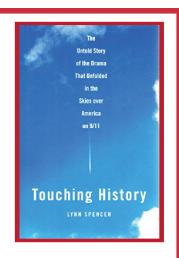


## SCHRC Thursday, July 18 Book 1 to 2:30 pm

We will examine Touching History: The Untold Story of the Drama That Unfolded in the Skies Over America on 9/11 (2008) by Lynn Spencer. Participants are responsible for obtaining their own books.

Register today!

The Book Club will be held in the former Mersberger Building, 517 Monroe Street, Sheboygan Falls, in the lower level meeting room.



#### **Gmach's Restaurant**

For more than 50 years Gmach's Restaurant was a place where the people of Sheboygan could go to eat. It was a popular restaurant from the very start. Gmach's served lunches of home style meals and sandwiches to the business and professional men and women of downtown Sheboygan. In the evenings it was a place for high school students to gather and meet.

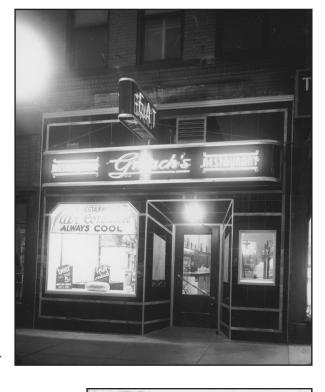
Henry Gmach, Sr., was born in Bavaria on November 5, 1876. He immigrated to the United States as a young boy with his family where they settled in Sheboygan. Henry married Mary Trumm on April 26, 1904. She was born in Germany on January 18, 1896.

In 1915, Henry opened an ice cream parlor at 1225 N. 8th Street and operated it until 1923. In 1921, he transferred his restaurant business to 628 N. 8th Street taking over the Betsy Ross Ice Cream Parlor and Restaurant.

In 1927, he opened Gmach's Restaurant in the former Henne Hat Shop at 708 N. 8th Street. Henry's son, Al, joined his father in the business in 1933, and took over the restaurant in 1935 when Henry retired. Al married Olga Nytes on June 22, 1933.



The Sheboygan Press, May 23, 1949



Henry Gmach installed what was believed to be the first automatic soda fountain anywhere in Wisconsin. He also claimed to use the first automatic carbonator in the state.

In 1947, the restaurant established the claim to being the first air conditioned business place in Sheboygan. In 1953, extensive remodeling

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The Sheboygan Press, April 23, 1955

was done which included the installation of the latest air conditioning system.

Al Gmach retired in 1960 and the business was sold. Since then, many different businesses have been housed in the building. Al and Olga Gmach retired to Florida. Olga died in Bradenton on March 19, 1985, and Al died on March 8, 1992, in Plano, Texas. They are buried in Greenlawn Memorial Park in Sheboygan.

### Sheboygan's Interurban Car



An interurban car heads east on Upper Falls Road (today's Erie Avenue) in this undated photo. The large house at the right still stands at 2612 Erie Ave.

The year 1898 had opened on an optimistic note when the Sheboygan Light Power & Railway Company (SLtP&Ry) proposed building an interurban line to Plymouth. The company stood to reap substantial passenger and freight revenues from the new line. But it also hoped that by making a connection with the Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad in Plymouth, it would force the Chicago & North Western to provide more competitive freight rates for shipments to and from Sheboygan.

The North Western had had a monopoly on rail service in Kohler and Sheboygan Falls since it acquired the Sheboygan & Fond du Lac (S&F) Railroad in 1880. It gained a monopoly on freight service in Sheboygan when it took control of the Milwaukee, Lakeshore & Western in 1893.

John Saemann asked the Sheboygan Advancement Association for \$45,000 in aid for his new Sheboygan, Sheboygan Falls & Plymouth Transit Co. He also sought \$5,000 from Sheboygan Falls. Eventually both turned him down.

Undeterred and working behind the scenes, Saemann continued to pursue his plans for an interurban line to Plymouth. He formed an enterprise called the Sheboygan Falls Transit Co. Then he secured a 99—year lease for a right—of—way over the Sheboygan—Sheboygan Falls toll road also known as the Sheboygan—Fond du Lac Road or the Upper Falls Road. The toll road had been created by Charles

Goerlitz when he put a gate across the road where it crossed his property.

Saemann also pledged to transfer \$5,000 from his personal account to his new company to show his faith in the project and in hopes of securing taxpayer support. The Sheboygan Common Council provided leverage when it approved an amendment to the SLtP&Ry charter allowing cars to carry freight on the proposed line to Plymouth.

Construction of Saemann's new line began with a tempered project — an interurban line from Sheboygan through Riverside to Sheboygan Falls. Work began in August 1899 at the end of the streetcar tracks at 18th Street and Erie Avenue. At that time, Erie Avenue beyond the city limits was no more than a dirt road. By mid–November the new Saemann line extended some two miles out of town.

Stop 1 on the new interurban line was at 18th and Erie. Stop 2, known as the Country Club stop, was located at the intersection of Evans Street and Upper Falls Road. It was a popular stop for both the members of the Country Club to the south and for visitors to the Sheboygan County Insane Asylum to the north. The crossing was unique in that it was protected by a warning bell and had a bench for customer convenience. Stop 6 was at Greendale Road.

Article reprinted from the book "To the Hills and Lakes" by Peter Fetterer.

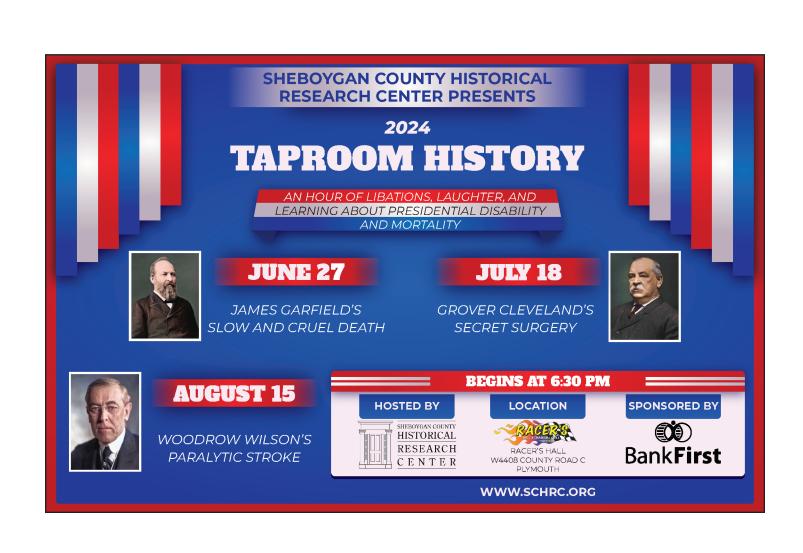


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