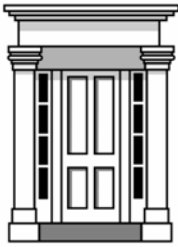


SHEBOYGAN COUNTY



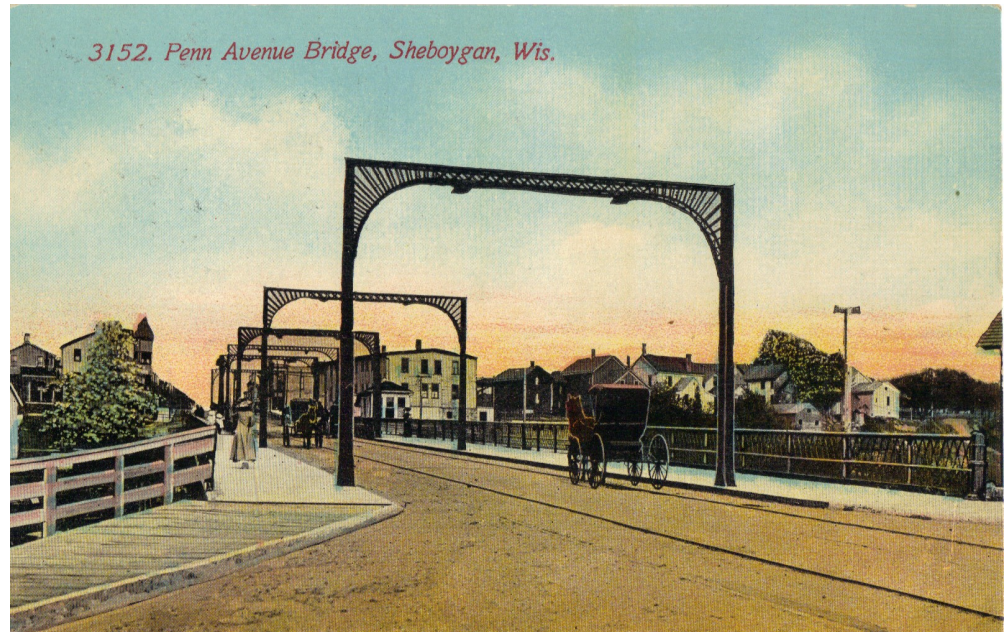
HISTORICAL  
RESEARCH  
CENTER

# The Researcher

The Newsletter of the Sheboygan County  
Historical Research Center

Volume XXVI Number 2 December 2015

## Without Bridges!



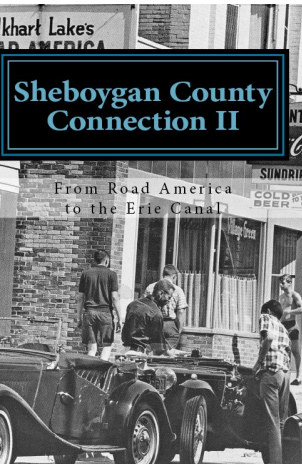
At least twice in the history of the City of Sheboygan, pioneer settlers found themselves without bridges thanks to the forces of nature. The river was first bridged at Eighth Street in 1845.

In succeeding years bridges were built: a foot bridge at Seventh Street in 1854; two draw bridges in 1855 at Wisconsin and Pennsylvania Avenues and a draw bridge at New Jersey Avenue in 1857. Earlier, a floating bridge was built by Joseph Kirkland near his steam sawmill. It was expensive to keep in repair and Kirkland wanted the city to take it over. When the council declined, he initiated a toll on each person who used the bridge.

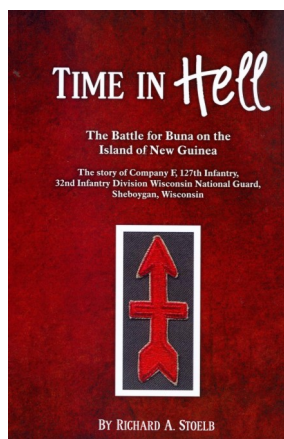
Kirkland getting rich, but citizens considered the toll a burden. They petitioned the Council to purchase the bridge and it did in 1854.

In March 1851, with two feet of snow on the ground it began raining in mid-month. Before the rain subsided, the whole area had flooded, sweeping away bridges, dams and mills and drowning horses, oxen and other livestock. Every ravine was filled and overflowing, and small rivulets swelled to rivers. The amount of damage totaled thousands of dollars in repairs.

Continued on page 6



## Shop SCHRC!



BY RICHARD A. STOELB

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 8:30am to 12:00 noon.

Closed December 24, 2015 through January 5, 2016 for the holidays.

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

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.

The Research Center is a sister organization to the Sheboygan County Historical Society and Museum which collects the artifacts of the county.

*If you file it, it comes to the Research Center. If you dust it, it goes to the museum.*

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**Don't miss Sheboygan County History column in the Saturday *Sheboygan Press* or online Friday through Sunday each week.**

### **Volunteer Thank You**

**Special thanks** to Sue Hailer, our talented garden volunteer. She keeps our yard and beautiful plants looking great.

**Thanks also** to Scott Lewandoske and Carey Federer for acting as Facebook volunteer marketing partners with SCHRC. Both manage active sites which promote SCHRC activities and help serve a very interested and creative historical community. Thousands of people participate in history dialog every week on their FB sites Historic Sheboygan and Sheboygan History. Great work guys!

### **Mark Your Calendars**

SCHRC will be closed from Monday, February 15 through Monday, February 29, 2016 for a second round of archiving. This time it's photos. Feels so great to get treasures processed and ready for use. Open to the public again on Tuesday, March 1,

### **Winter Programs**

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

**Made possible by funding from the John and Hilda Holden Memorial Fund**

Plymouth Arts Center, 520 East Mill Street, Plymouth 9:30am to 11:30am

December 12, 2015 - John Eastberg - Grand Avenue Mansions and Milwaukee's Beer Barons

January 9, 2016 - Jessie Garcia - My Life with the Green and Gold - Packer Stories

February 13, 2016 - Erika Janick - Giving Them What They Want- Quack Medicine

**(Genealogy Classes) SCHRC** 518 Water Street, Sheboygan Falls 1:00pm to 3:00pm

Monday, December 14, 2015 Use of Obituaries in Research - Advanced

Monday, January 11, 2015 - Work day — No charge

Monday, February 8, 2015 - Work day — No charge

Second Saturdays continues as usual.

History on the Move will return in March.

January and February are for archiving. See you in spring.

**Don't forget to shop SCHRC's book store.**

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# Big Barn Lost With Contents

Fire Departments Of  
Cascade, Beechwood  
Are Called To Scene  
Monday Night

The worst fire in the Cascade area in the last six years completely destroyed a 40 x 70 foot barn near Cascade in the town of Mitchell late Monday night.

The large barn, located on the farm of Lawrence O'Reilly five miles from Cascade on County Trunk "F" was beyond saving when firemen arrived. Immediate estimates of the total damage were not available, but in addition to the barn valued at over \$16,000, 20 pigs, 120 hens, a wagon, a Gehl blower, a chopper and other equipment, and over 50 tons of hay were lost.

The large storage of hay was still smoldering and occasionally bursting into flames hours after the barn was completely leveled.

## Call Two Departments

Approximately 300 people watched the blaze, and 50 firemen led by Chief Harold Vanderkin of Cascade and Art Fritz of Beechwood were called to the fire. Both the Cascade and Beechwood fire departments arrived about 10 minutes after they received the emergency call.

Farmer O'Reilly, who had retired at 10 p.m., awoke at 10:50 to discover the barn on fire. Although he sent out an immediate call and the firemen arrived in a matter of minutes, the roof and sides of the barn were down and the fire was out of control at their arrival.

The silo next to the barn also was beyond saving although it is still standing. The intense heat from the burning barn cracked the silo and spread to the inside where 12 feet of silage was burned.

The cattle and two tractors parked next to the barn were saved, and emergency precautions were taken by the firemen to protect the farmhouse and other buildings. Neighbors offered immediate help, but the cattle remained on the O'Reilly farm.

## Fire Spreads Quickly

A large machine shed was not damaged and is available for use as an emergency barn.

The fire spread so quickly that Cascade Fire Chief Vanderkin reported that the flames were visible to the firemen as they left Cascade to answer the call. As yet neither Chief Vanderkin or Chief Fritz have been able to determine the cause of the fire.

The barn which is insured, was built in 1915 but new rafters and stanchions were added less than a year ago, and firemen stated that farmer O'Reilly's estimate of the barn's value at \$16,000 was conservative.

O'Reilly lives with his wife on the farm which was homesteaded by his ancestors in 1848 after it was bought from the government. The farm has been in the family's possession since, and O'Reilly has been the owner for the last five years. The farm consists of 133 acres.

# Cascade Area Has One Of Worst Fires

Sheboygan Press—July 24, 1951



Firemen from the Cascade and Beechwood fire departments are shown fighting the blaze which completely out of control although they arrived within minutes of the emergency call. The fire began about 10:50 p.m., and the large storage of hay in the barn was still burning long after the barn had been leveled. (Sheboygan Press Photo.) The farm was located on Mink Creek Road, not F.

Cascade Fire Trucks—1948





Crews stringing electric line on old Green Bay Road, north of Howards Grove on the Schumacher Farm. Circa 1927. (SCHRC Collection)

## **Rural Electrification Transformed Sheboygan County**

When Ben Franklin flew his kite into a thunderstorm day that June day in 1752 it is unlikely he could foresee how his dance with electricity would change lives.

Electricity remained an elusive concept until the 1880s when two physics powerhouses, Thomas Edison, a proponent of direct current, and Nikola Tesla, champion of AC, managed to harness it, but their competition was so fierce that in 1889 Edison actually arranged for a convicted New York murderer to be put to death in an AC-powered electric chair—a stunt designed to show how dangerous the Tesla's model could be.

Tesla's alternating current finally prevailed, but Edison took the fame and gave us light bulbs with long lasting filaments.

Wisconsin actually built the first commercial electric plant in the United States. It opened in Appleton on August 29, 1882, just two weeks ahead of the plant that would power New York City's Wall Street. Appleton's inaugural plant powered three paper mills, the waterworks and five homes. Since no meters existed customers were charged \$2.00 per bulb per month.

Although nearly 90 percent of urban dwellers had electricity by the 1930s, only ten percent of rural dwellers did. Utility companies argued that it was too expensive to string electric lines to isolated farms. They also questioned farmers' ability to pay for such upgrades.

In 1935, the Rural Electric Administration (REA) was created to bring electricity to rural areas and improve the standard of living for families. One of the most successful government programs ever enacted during the Great Depression, it brought electricity to 1.5 million farms in 45 states within two years.

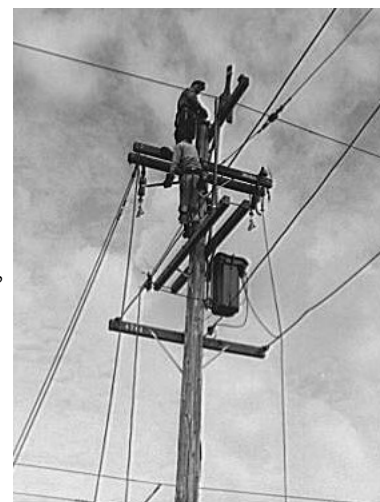
By 1939, the cost of a mile of rural line had dropped from \$2,000 to \$600. Almost half of all farms were wired by 1942 and virtually all of them by the 1950s.

Farmers required more energy than city dwellers, many of whom had electricity since the 1890s. This increased usage helped offset the extra cost involved in bringing power lines to the country.

A Sheboygan Press article of April 7, 1939 ranked Sheboygan County as one of the richest in the state and one of the highest in rural electrification. Of the 3,037 farms in the county, electric service was available to 2,939 or 96.7 percent. Wisconsin Power and Light was the leader in rural electrification in 1948 adding 1,434 farms during the first six months of the year.

The Martin Hoppert farm was located near the city of Sheboygan, near the intersection of today's Taylor Drive and Indiana Avenue. Almost eighty acres in size, Hoppert's farm had electricity as early as 1925 being located so close to the city. A promotional piece from the Wisconsin Utilities Council reports they had a number of motors running their one milking machine, a barn fan, a refrigerator and a bottle washer along with lighting.

Electricity also powered the house, a furnace, hot plate, two irons, a vacuum cleaner, a washing machine and pumped water throughout the house. They also used an electric truck to deliver milk. Batteries were charged every night, making it cheaper to run than their old Ford truck.



Stringing lines.

Before the REA strung electric lines to connect rural homes, a few farmers bought battery systems to run lights, and perhaps, a radio. Other farmers had carbide gas light systems installed. These systems consisted of buried tanks where water and carbide pellets mixed to create gas. This gas was piped into a house or barn where it burned in gas fixtures.

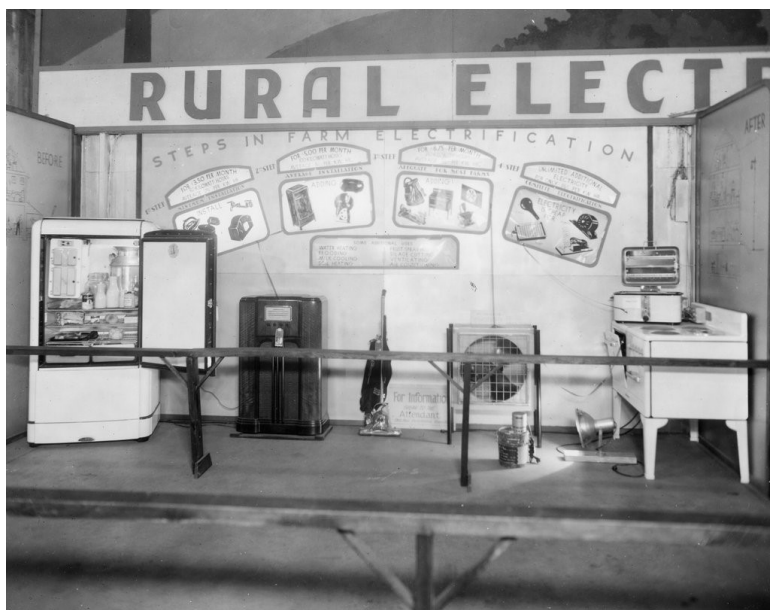
With the creation of the REA, electric co-ops were formed. They used low interest loans from the government to build the electric lines. Occasionally the crews dropped off poles at farms so farmers could earn a little money by digging holes themselves.

It's hard to explain just how drastically electricity changed the lives of farm families. It brought power for lights to work, read, and sew at night. It brought power for appliances like refrigerators and freezers to preserve food. It rid homes of dangerous kerosene lamps and candles on Christmas trees.

It also brought the outside world into every home via the radio relieving isolation.

But, perhaps most importantly, it brought about indoor plumbing; no more late night trips to the outhouse in January. Water, a well pump and a septic system were gratefully received.

Whenever one speaks to a child of the 1930s, it is easy to see that the move to electricity was life changing. It was so dramatic that most people growing up during that time can remember and describe the wonderful moment the "lights came on." Rural electrification was a gift and a success.



An exhibit showing the steps necessary to achieving rural electrification.



## **Eighth Street Bridge**



### **Bridges, continued from page 1**

The new bridge at Sheboygan Falls was carried away with a loss of logs and damages to mills and dams. Two other bridges outside Sheboygan and one at the mouth of the Sheboygan River were also ravaged. A float bridge near the mouth of the river "moved out of the harbor in fine style, and is probably cruising about Lake Michigan, a dangerous voyage at this season of the year, and its return is considered extremely doubtful," was reported in a newspaper account of the flooding.

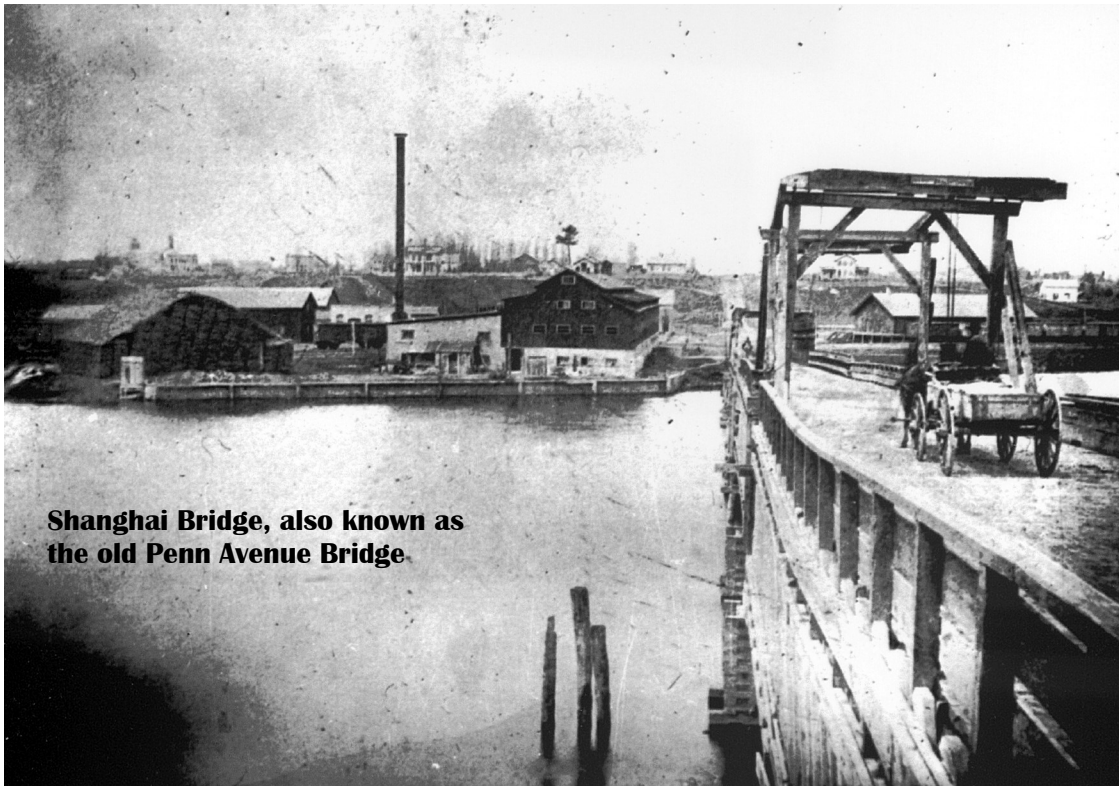
"At the Pigeon River, several sawmills came rushing headlong through the forest taking off what few bridges came its way, together with a portion of the dam at Wilgus' mill and making nearly a clean sweep of Cole's dam a few miles below. Several yoke of oxen were also drowned," the newspaper story said.

"After the rain came two freezing days, followed by a moderation in the weather," the newspaper report continued. "The streams are rapidly falling and the time is not far distant when the bridges will be rebuilt. The mails will get along and people will get along and send and receive letters, discuss the news of the day as they were wont to do in times gone by. At least we hope so," the report concluded.

The next time the bridges all were lost occurred 19 years later in April 1870. The lengthy and colorful account in the newspaper of April 9, 1870 read as follows: "On Saturday last the Sheboygan River got on a rampage and gave an exhibition of one of the greatest freshets ever seen by the oldest inhabitants. The rain of a day or so previous, with the melting of snow, so swelled the current as to break up the ice of the river very suddenly and during Friday afternoon and night a pack of broken ice accumulated above the Wisconsin street bridge and diverted the water from the channel, which was already full, until it covered nearly the entire bottom from the brick yard to the railroad embankment, surrounding and entering many dwellings so that they could only be approached in boats, and were by that means vacated by their inhabitants. Such was the state of things Saturday morning."

"About eight o'clock, the schooners Gazelle and Plymouth, lying above the New Jersey Street Bridge, broke from their moorings by the force of the breaking ice and were carried broadside against the bridge, carrying it away. Just below the bridge and fastened to it lay the dredge scow (a large flat-bottomed boat) and dredge (a boat equipped with machinery to deepen waterways), along with the Tiger, a tugboat, between them across the current. Captain Muzzy got up steam on the tug in anticipation of the going off of the bridge."

"Above and pressing against the Eighth Street bridge were enormous quantities of ice, which about 11:30 o'clock broke



**Shanghai Bridge, also known as the old Penn Avenue Bridge**

through the bridge carrying away about 100 feet and rushed onward with irresistible force striking the Gazelle and Plymouth, sweeping them through the New Jersey Street bridge with a crash carrying away two-thirds of the latter, with Tiger and scow, swiftly lake-wards. Two schooners had their anchors out and were enabled soon to bring up on the south-shore. The dredge was prevented from going off by the spuds and dipper which were all down."

"Capt. Muzzy had a moment before stepping from the tug to the bridge and no one was on it when the crash came. Muzzy with three

others ran down to Gay's dock in advance of the tug and scow which were fastened together, and as they reached that point were fortunately so near the dock that they were enabled to jump aboard. They were carried out into the lake with the ice and a mile or so southward but succeeded in getting back in the course of a couple of hours. The promptness and determination of Capt. Muzzy and his men alone saved the tug and scow.

"Shortly after the giving way of the Eighth Street bridge, about one-third of the Wisconsin Street bridge with the acres of ice above it came down with a tremendous rush, and from that time the water began to abate somewhat in height. An enormous pack of ice gorged together from Seeley's Bluff up to the mill dam causing the water to flow over the Lyman and Follet farms making it necessary for the latter and also for Mr. Ashby's family to vacate their dwellings for a time.

"A ferry has been plying across the river at Eighth Street since the disaster for the convenience of pedestrians. The rebuilding of the bridge should be hurried along with the greatest possible dispatch for the interest of the public absolutely demands it."

Less than two weeks later the Eighth Street bridge was ready for crossing. It was the most substantial bridge ever built in the city. The piles were firmer and deeper-driven, the roadway wider, flanked on one side by a railed foot walk and the whole bridge was floored with three-inch oak plank from Crane and Thorne's steam mill at St. Cloud. Aldermen Coffrin and Reich did the work on the new bridge.

In August of 1919, Herman Kraemer, local jeweler on Eight Street, gave a first-hand accounting of the flood of 1870. He was a young boy of 14 when the melting of the snow along with the heavy rains broke up the ice on the river and jammed at a point north of the Wisconsin Avenue bridge. He said it soon became apparent that nothing could save the four bridges from being carried out into the lake.

Hundreds of people gathered at a point where St. Cyril and Methodius Church now stands on North Ninth Street and Maryland Avenue. Kraemer joined the crowd of people to see the sight. Shortly after 10 o'clock the ice began to move taking the Wisconsin Avenue bridge, followed by the Eighth and Seventh Street structures, carrying them all out into the lake, leaving the city without a bridge.

Along with the bridges the tug Tiger was also carried out. The Tiger was the Port of Sheboygan's first tugboat. It was brought here by Capt. Muzzy from Chicago. The tug was later purchased by Ole Groh and was the first tug owned by the Groh brothers.

Along with Capt. Muzzy, August Zierath Sr. jumped aboard the craft as it passed the New Holstein elevator at the foot of Jefferson Avenue. Later that afternoon the men brought the tug back to port.

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Kraemer further noted that with the departure of the bridges, those drivers of teams left on the south side of the river when the ice went out were compelled to go to the Ashby bridge on the lower Falls Road to get to the north side of the city.

The Ashby bridge wasn't built until 1874 so Kraemer must be in error here. Perhaps there was another bridge near or at this site. However the teamsters had to have gone west in order to cross the river at some point. Of the four bridges, the Seventh and Eighth Street bridges, and the Pennsylvania and Wisconsin Avenue bridges, all had draws for ships operated by hand except for the Seventh Street bridge, which was a float bridge. It was also known as the New Jersey Bridge.

We seldom really think about how much we depend on bridges . . . until they're gone.

By Jan Hildebrand, 2007





## **“Carl Renatus Wilhelm Erbe: Sheboygan County’s Fascinating Itinerant Minister”**

by Scott Noegel

It is difficult to undertake research into Sheboygan’s early history without encountering Carl Renatus Wilhelm Erbe (b. April 13, 1810, d. February 22, 1887). His name appears on countless county records as the officiant for baptisms, weddings, and deaths—usually with his title “Minister of the Gospel.” Early histories, like those by Frank P. Franke and Carl Zillier, mention him only in passing as a reverend who ministered to the spiritual needs of the early settlers.<sup>1</sup> The family records on which his name appears attest to the true scope of his zeal and itinerancy. From 1850 until his death in 1887, he went mostly on foot to conduct hundreds of ceremonies throughout Sheboygan County, and beyond. Yet, he was never affiliated with any church. He lived on 40 acres of land in Section 26 of Town Rhine. Nevertheless, he played no role in the founding, services, or membership of any of the relevant nearby parishes, even though each existed during the period that he was making house calls: Immanuel German Reformed was founded in 1848, Saron Reformed Church in 1855, St. Peter’s Evangelical in 1858, and the Zoar Reformed Congregation in 1862.

Little is known about Erbe’s personal life. He was born in Schwallungen, Saxe-Meiningen, Thüringen. When he immigrated to America in 1849, he was a thirty-nine year old student of theology.<sup>2</sup> His departure assured that he would never complete the degree. Soon after arriving in Wisconsin, he married Julia Maria Elonore Genssler, and they had two children: Edward (b. September 2, 1851, d. April 18, 1896) and Mary (b. August 30, 1853, d. December 21, 1934). His wife sadly died in 1853, and he married again to a Bavarian named Anna Sophia Auernheimer on February 3, 1854. They had four children: Julius (b. January 26, 1856, d. May 12, 1916), Caroline (b. August 2, 1857, d. November 2, 1857), Sophia Louise (b. November 22, 1858, d. February 27, 1873), and Sophia Renata (b. May 10, 1863, d. January 31, 1922).

In the early years, Erbe conducted services in a cabin across the road from where the Civil War monument now stands in Town Rhine, a cabin that later served as a Town Hall.<sup>3</sup> There he was recalled as “a stern good-looking man” who “pronounced the service with much solemnity.”<sup>4</sup> However, from the 1860s on, when he was not “on the road,” he worked from his home. Carl Renatus Erbe died on February 22, 1887, and he was buried at Liberty Cemetery in Town Rhine.

Such are the basic contours of his life. Nevertheless, a few external facts shed a bit more light on our subject. The first, is that in Germany one could not preach, counsel, lead a parish, and administer sacraments without the approval of the Royal Consistory and an ordination license.<sup>5</sup> For those from poorer families, a theology degree

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<sup>1</sup> Frank D. Franke, *Geschichte von Sheboygan County* (Sheboygan, WI: Demokrat Printing Company, 1898), p. 184; Carl Zillier, *History of Sheboygan County, Wisconsin, Past and Present*. Vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: S. J. Clarke, 1912), p. 263.

<sup>2</sup> Found in Kreis Meiningen Nr. 697. Regierungsblatt für das Herzogtum Sachsen-Meiningen, 1849, Bl. 095; Hildburghausen, Regierungsblatt 1849, Bl. 086.

<sup>3</sup> According to the *Sheboygan Press*, April 29, 1927, he also taught school in a log cabin on the northeast corner of Section 26. The structure appears in the 1862 plat map.

<sup>4</sup> The quotation comes from the *Sheboygan Press*, July 28, 1913, which posthumously published the journal entries of pioneer settler Laura Smith (nee: Chase) and her commentary upon them in 1873. She reports that on Sunday, May 4, 1851: ““We went over to the school house for church. Arrived there we found the desk occupied by a German Lutheran Priest. He preached a sermon and then gave the communion... This must have been one of the first ever held there.’ Mr. Boecher says he has no idea who the minister was. During this year a Mr. Erbe (not a Lutheran) held services here in German.” Since only Erbe was known to use that building, Mrs. Smith must have met Carl Erbe. Rev. Carl Christian Wilhelm Schmitz of Milwaukee and Germantown intermittently preached in the cabin in the late 1840s, but he was no longer active when Erbe arrived. Schmitz died in 1854.

<sup>5</sup> I thank Dr. Prof. Manfred Gailus of the Technische Universität Berlin for confirming this. For a detailed overview of German Pfarrergeschichte, see Oliver Janz, *Bürger besonderer Art. Evangelische Pfarrer in Preußen 1850-1914* (Berlin/New York 1994).

could take two years to complete, but for those of means, it might take five to ten years. Since established clergy families had political clout and were connected to the administration, a longer education in theology often came with social and financial gains.<sup>6</sup> It is unclear which of the two tracks Carl was charting, but the fact that he was thirty-nine suggests that he might have been on the latter. Regardless of what convinced him to stop his progress to degree, his lack of completion meant that he never had official authoritative status, but obtained his position in Wisconsin solely through declaration and tradition. This is confirmed by Rev. Louis von Ragué, whom the German Evangelical Synod sent to Town Rhine in December of 1864, and who soon raised the funds to erect St. Peter's Church. In von Ragué's memoirs, he states that when he arrived he learned that Town Rhine already had "einen freien Pastor," i.e., one not affiliated with any synodical denomination.<sup>7</sup>

Additional insight into Erbe's life and work comes from the recent recovery of Erbe's hand-written register of baptisms, confirmands, marriages, and deaths.<sup>8</sup> Since the record was mislabeled, most researchers interested in Town Rhine probably have never thought to consult it.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, a close reading of the manuscript reveals that its folios were dislodged from the binding long before it was microfilmed and reconstituted with little attention to its original order. Consequently, the register jumps forwards and backwards in time in no less than sixteen places, often by several decades, and always without warning. The register's disarray makes it difficult to use and has helped to keep many of its records hidden. This is unfortunate, as it contains a veritable gold mine of genealogical and historical information. For this reason, I soon shall publish and make available through the SCHRC an English translation of the entire manuscript (in its corrected order) that also details the ways in which it sheds light on Erbe and the early immigrant settlers of the region.

For the nonce, I highlight here a couple of the more interesting finds. For one, the register reveals the extraordinary extent of Erbe's work and influence throughout the region. Though the aforementioned early histories refer to him only in passing, he officiated 1418 baptisms, 275 marriages, and 361 burials over a thirty-five year career. He also performed confirmations for 567 children mainly in the Towns of Rhine and Sheboygan Falls (at Johnsonville), but also at Schleswig and periodically elsewhere. No less than 1156 family names appear in the register. The data shows that, despite the existence of several nearby churches, Erbe remained the officiant of choice for many families for nearly four decades. This likely relates to the Freethinking views of many of the region's settlers who resisted the influence of organized religion in the New World.<sup>10</sup> In fact, Town Rhine and nearby Plymouth each had their own Deutsche Freie Gemeinde (German Free Congregation) at this time.<sup>11</sup> Rev. von Ragué observes the community's Freethinking leanings in his memoirs

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<sup>6</sup> See Nicholas Hope, *German and Scandinavian Protestantism 1700-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 109-115.

<sup>7</sup> See Louis von Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission! Pastor Louis von Ragué. Erinnerungen aus seinem Leben und Wirken* (Hoylton, IL: Evangelische Waisenheime, 12, 1912), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> I thank Jim Schultz for suggesting to me that Erbe's records might be those mislabeled "German Church Records from Herman Township, Wisconsin, 1851-1886" (LDS film 1377864, Item 3). While translating the register I was able to confirm it. I shall provide additional evidence for the identification in the book mentioned below, but for now I note the fact that Erbe records many self-references, including that he baptized, confirmed, and married his daughter, Maria Renata, at his home.

<sup>9</sup> The records were incorrectly identified, because the photographer noticed that the first event took place in Town Herman, but he did not read much beyond that point.

<sup>10</sup> This was particularly the case in Towns Rhine, Sheboygan Falls, and also Town Schleswig in Manitowoc County. Summarized well by Helmut Schmahl, *Verpflanzt, aber nicht entwurzelt: Die Auswanderung aus Hessen-Darmstadt (Provinz Rheinhessen) nach Wisconsin im 19. Jahrhundert* (Mainzer Studien zur Neueren Geschichte, 1; Peter Lang Verlag Frankfurt am Main, 2000), pp. 312-334. The *Sheboygan Press*, September 19, 1958, recalls that early church records indicate that "Frontier life frequently encouraged individuals to oppose restraints and regulation, including restraints of a religious nature..." and that von Ragué's predecessor, "the Rev. Mr. Zeller became discouraged and left the newly-formed congregation after two years of struggle." I shall discuss the Deutsch Freie Gemeinde in greater detail in the book.

<sup>11</sup> See Eduard Schröder, "Die zweite Auflage der Freien Gemeinde zu Plymouth (Wisc.)," *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben* 14/11 (1869) pp. 172-174.

when he records the following response of one of the settlers after learning he was a pastor: “We need no pastor here, we are in a free land.”<sup>12</sup> Another settler saw pastors as living “high on the hog” at the expense of poor farmers:

In Germany they were the bosses, but here we are. What does he do for the four hundred dollars (a year)? During the week he instructs and beats our children, and on Sundays he preaches to us for an hour. Plus, we are all young fellows and have lots of kids. For every baptism he gets two dollars. And then he comes to the baptism with his whole family, and when they are ready to travel home, he gets a sack of potatoes or apples, a ham, a mettwurst, a rooster, or a drake. That’s more than plenty for his work.<sup>13</sup>

Given the Freethinking nature of the community, it is no wonder they preferred a “freien pastor.” Thus, from a sociological perspective, one might say that Erbe filled a niche. He met the traditional, sacramental and legal needs of the community, but required no commitment in terms of parish attendance, responsibilities, or financial collections, other than his fees, which also were cheaper by half.<sup>14</sup>

Study of the manuscript also reveals the complex nature of Erbe’s religious views and commitment to reform. In addition to administering the sacraments to those with normative needs, he baptized children born out of wedlock and provided services to those of various religious affiliations. Though the majority of families that Erbe served were neighbors in Town Rhine with at least nominal connections to the German Evangelical Reform church, he also provided services for Lutherans, Baptists, and Catholics. Others whom he served possessed no denominational affiliation. He appears to have served anyone who knocked on his door, though for weddings in which a young woman’s age might raise eyebrows, he records parental consent. Some members of his flock also clearly were in no hurry to baptize their children. One finds many baptisms that have been postponed from five to seventeen years. Such practices reveal the complex nature of Erbe’s religious views, his commitment to reform, and the diversity of his flock. Indeed, a look at the faiths of his own children is equally instructive. His daughter Mary was Lutheran and his daughter Renata was German Evangelical, whereas his son Julius was a member of the Congregational church.

As one might imagine, Erbe’s lack of official affiliation has led to a number of strained efforts to provide him with one. Later accounts label him variously as “Lutheran,” “not Lutheran,” and “Evangelical Reform.”<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, Rev. von Ragué’s description of a “freien Pastor” is closer in time and also the most accurate as it attaches him to the Freie Gemeinde movement. Indeed, Erbe’s religious views and practices resist easy

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<sup>12</sup> “Pfaffen brauchen sie hier nicht, wir seien in einem freien Lande.” See von Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission!*, p. 24.

<sup>13</sup> See von Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission!*, p. 32, who also captures the dialect: “In Dütschland wören sie die Herren, hier sind wi dat. Wat döht he denn för die 400 Daler? In de Weeke lehrt he und prügelt use Jungens und det Sundags predigt he uns ene Stunde was vor. Dann sind wie alle junge Kerls und hebben veel Kinner. För jede Kindäupe (Kindtaufe) krieght he zwei Daler. Dann kömmt he mit sine ganze Familie up de Kindäupe, und wenn sie no Hus föhrt, dann krieght he noch einen Sack Kartuffeln oder Aeppel, nen Schinken oder Mettwurst, nen Ruster (Hahn) oder’n Draken (Enterich) met. Das ist genug för sine Arbeit.”

<sup>14</sup> The young man that von Ragué quotes states that clergymen receive \$2.00 for every baptism. Erbe’s records show that he received on average \$1.00 for baptisms, confirmations, and burial sermons, and \$2.00 for marriages. He often received even less—sometimes nothing. However, after the late 1860s, he began to receive on average \$1.00 more per marriage and 50¢ more for the other sacraments.

<sup>15</sup> The obituary of his son Julius in the *Sheboygan Press*, May 12, 1916, states that Carl was former pastor of the Reformed Church at Town Rhine. According to *75jähriges Jubiläum der Sheboygan Klassis*, p. 85, he offered the Heidelberg catechism. The 1860 federal census for Town Rhine records his occupation as “preacher.” The 1880 census reads “minister (Lutheran).” A piece on the history of Town Rhine in the *Sheboygan Press*, April 29, 1927, labels him “Evangelical Lutheran.” See also n. 4 above.



classification. He appears to have come to America with a liberal sense of the authority of his calling and denominational boundaries.



**Gravestone of Carl Renatus Wilhelm Erbe in Liberty Cemetery, Town of Rhine, Sheboygan County, Wisconsin**

Such views were not unique among Wisconsin's German pioneers, especially in the early period of settlement.<sup>16</sup> In the 1860s, a Presbyterian minister served the needs of St. John's German Evangelical Congregation in Germantown. Karl Dürr, a German immigrant farmer at Sauk City founded a German Free Congregation without a theology degree. In Thiensville, another long-standing Freethinking community, all funerals were non-religious, civic leaders performed all marriages, and leaders of the community baptized their children in the name of "the United States of America."<sup>17</sup> Town Rhine's own Rev. von Ragué records an even more ecumenical pastor living only eight miles from his home, a German from Neuwied, who identified himself as "Bishop of the (United) Evangelical and Roman Catholic Brethren, Prince and Chief of the Tuscarora and Susquehannock Indian tribes."<sup>18</sup> Though more unorthodox in practice and belief than Erbe, such figures provide a backdrop for why the synod was anxious to send pastors like von Ragué to Town Rhine.<sup>19</sup> Yet like Erbe, they embody the sort of creative adaptation of religious ideas that was taking place in early Wisconsin and the freedom of thought to which many immigrants felt entitled in America. Perhaps more than anything, they remind us that Sheboygan County's pioneer past was far more colorful than black and white photos might suggest.

<sup>16</sup> Schmahl, *Verpflanzt, aber nicht entwurzelt*, pp. 297-298, also makes reference to the influence of various itinerant preachers on Rheinhessians in Washington County. For insights into the life of an itinerant preacher (in this case Methodist) in early Wisconsin, see W. G. Miller, *Thirty Years in the Itinerancy* (Milwaukee, WI: I. L. Harvey and Company, 1875).

<sup>17</sup> See "Village of Freethinkers 'Godless' for 80 Years," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 13, 1940. The article also reports that when John F. Gierach and John Bublitz tried to canvass the town to raise money for a church, they were offered \$50 to keep the church out of the town. Thiensville also was founded by Forty-Eighters. No church appeared in Thiensville until 1919.

<sup>18</sup> "Bischof der evangelischen und römisch-katholischen Brüder, Prinz und Häuptling des Indianerstammes der Tuskarora und Susquehannot." See von Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission!*, p. 35. The man had married a Native American daughter of a chief. He also had studied theology under Ragué's uncle in Langenberg.

<sup>19</sup> Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission!*, p. 26, notes that "die Synode wünsche so sehr in Wisconsin Fuß zu fassen," i.e., "the synod wants to seize a foot(hold) in Wisconsin." More than once he logs his desire to leave Town Rhine for a community more receptive to the church. His predecessor, the Rev. Mr. Zeller, became discouraged and left the newly-formed congregation after two years of struggle. On the competition between various missionary movements and Protestant leanings towards free thinkers, see Richard N. Current, *The History of Wisconsin. Volume II: The Civil War Era, 1848-1873* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976), pp. 545-550.