

Quarterly Newsletter of the



MURRAY COUNTY —HISTORICAL SOCIETY—

Slayton, Murray County, Minnesota

Winter 2021

Taking Flight in Murray County: The Age of Air

By: Janet Timmerman

It has been a little over 105 years since the first novel machine called an Aeroplane first fascinated the residents of our county. Since that time, they have experienced the first mail flights, daily passenger service, breaking the sound barrier, and space flight. The sound of a passing plane seldom sparks an urge to look skyward unless it is an aerial spray plane immediately overhead. It is a technology we have



First airplane reported in Murray County at Lake Wilson Farmer Days, 1915.MCHS archives.

come to take for granted. The history of flight in the county offers a glimpse into how residents embraced a new technology and then came to rely on it.

It was less than a dozen years between the first successful flight at Kitty Hawk in 1903 and the first flying machines that entered Murray County airspace. Airplane sightings began before the First World War.

Robert Forrest, the editor of the Lake Wilson Pilot remembered the county's first airplane when it landed

outside Lake Wilson in about 1915, piloted by Otto Timm. The picture of the plane resembles an early Curtiss model with ailerons centered between the two bi-plane wings. These planes were produced around 1912.

Others saw their first airplane when on vacation. Gus Ziemann, of Lake Wilson, and his young son, Bill, took a ride in an early plane while on vacation in California around 1918. In a photo album kept by the Roland Johnson family, a hazy photo is labeled, "Our first Airplane," and dated around 1920.

Planes developed for use in war spawned heroic stories of pilots in aerial dogfights. They were exotic and crowds gathered whenever one landed in a nearby field. In those earliest days of flight, airplanes were a novelty used for shows and entertainment. The term barnstorming came from the freelance pilots who would do a flyover to get



Gus and Bill Ziemann pose in an early California plane, circa 1918. Notice where the radiator and exhaust are located. Timmerman Family album. Timmerman family photo.



Roland Johnson family took note of the first airplane they saw around 1920. Johnson family scrapbook, MCHS.

in the air all the time and people taking joyrides..." It seems there was no lack of interest on the part of the locals as the planes were kept busy throughout the three days of the fair.

For the July Fourth in 1921, the Murray County Fair Association held a special airshow to raise funds. They hosted the St. Paul Dispatch Flying Circus. The highlight of this show was the Flying Squirrel, a stunt where a wing-walker aerialist jumped from the wing of one bi-plane onto the wing of a second plane in mid-air. That wing walker could very well have been Speed Holman, for which the Holman Airfield in St. Paul was named. He was working as an aerialist for the Dispatch Flying Circus at the time. The advertisement for the Airshow encouraged people to come early and stay late. Another County Fair airshow in the early 1930s featured an airplane flying through a barn in true "barnstorm" fashion. The idea of air flight was so popular that it led the editor of the Murray County Herald to correctly predict in 1919, "...Another few years and the aeroplane will be as common as the automobile."

By the middle of the 1920s the United State Post Office was using airplanes to deliver mail to major cities. Mail leaving from Currie on the morning train would switch to an airplane in Omaha and be on either coast in less the 30 hours, cutting off two full days for arrival times. Airmail stamps cost eighteen cents as opposed to a regular mail two cent stamp. The Ford and Edsel Motor Company contracted to

people's attention and then land in a field and use a nearby barn to gather an audience. People paid to go for a quick ride or to see aerial acrobatics. The Murray County Fair hosted more than one airshow in the early 20th Century.

In 1919, an airshow featured plane rides for fairgoers at \$10 per ticket for a ten-minute ride. That is about \$150 in today's currency. The editor of the Murray County Herald said, "Airplanes are so plentiful out by the fairgrounds that people seldom look up as they pass over...Last week there were two to eight planes

THURSDAY, JULY 4, 1921. THE MURRAY COUNTY HERALD, SLAYTON, MINNESOTA. PAGE THREE

*Come Early
Stay Late*

CELEBRATE on
at **SLAYTON, Minn.**
With The **JULY 4th**
Murray County Fair Assn.

Addresses by **GOV. J. A. O. PREUS** of Minnesota, and by
Pres. Potter of the Minnesota Farm Bureau

Civic, Military and Industrial Parade | Ball Games—Horse Races—Free Acts

SEE THE FLYING SQUIRREL
With St. Paul Dispatch Flying Circus Change From Plane to Plane,
in midair while traveling at 90 miles an hour

FREE DANCING ON THE PAVEMENT
MAGNIFICENT FIREWORKS

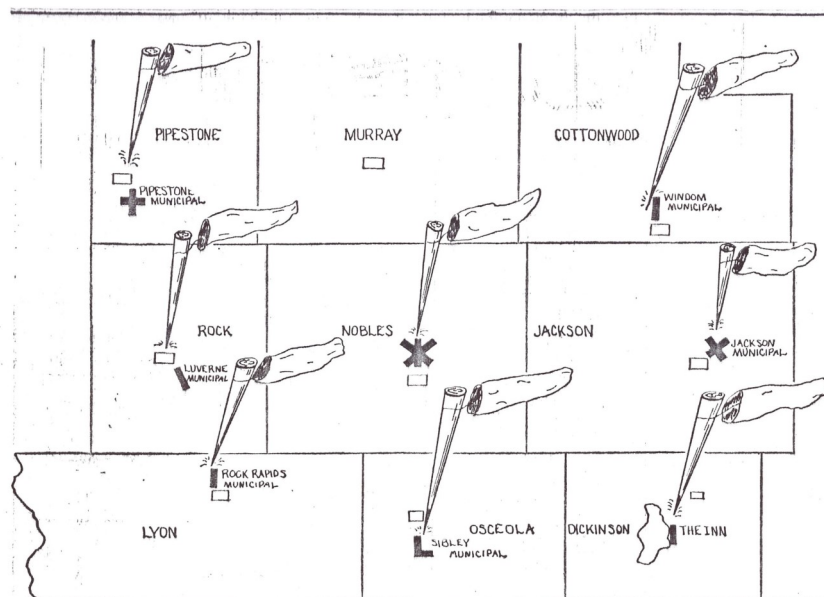
Morning Program, FREE. Afternoon Program at Fair Grounds 50c and war tax.
Children under fourteen years FREE

Aerial show hired for the July 4th celebration.
Murray County Herald, June 30, 1921.

deliver mail and freight by air in 1924. As part of the plan the company required more than 8,000 of its dealerships across the country to paint the name of their town on the roof in letters over a foot high as a wayfinding guide for pilots as they made their way across the USA. Slayton Motors lettered their roof in the winter of 1926, after the snow melted off the roof.

The idea for an airport or landing site was proposed in the 1920s. In 1933, William Mullhill, of the Aeronautics Commission stopped at Slayton to discuss the location

of a federally subsidized airport. By January of 1934, the plans were solidified into the purchase of a quarter section of land from the Dinehart Estate, west of Slayton. The construction of the federal airport began, but within months the work was ordered to stop indefinitely due to the Great Depression. It was allowed to finish four months later with the leveling and seeding of an airstrip. This grass strip soon would have become outdated for the larger planes that the town had hoped would



Map of regional airports with a gaping omission. MCH 1966.

PUBLIC INVITED TO ATTEND
Slayton Airport
DEDICATION
AND
Fly-In
BREAKFAST
Sun., June 29
SPONSORED BY THE SLAYTON CHAMBER OF COMMERCE 1969

FREE BREAKFAST
FOR ALL PILOTS
SERVING 7:30 A.M. - 10:30 A.M.

PATTI SORENSON
1968 - 1969 MISS SLAYTON
AND 2ND RUNNER-UP IN THE
MISS MINNESOTA PAGEANT WILL
WELCOME EACH PILOT
AS THEY LAND.

FREE ROUND OF GOLF FOR ALL PILOTS

COURTESY CARS AT THE AIRPORT FOR PILOTS ALL DAY.

CHURCH SERVICES — SWIMMING POOL — SIGHTSEEING

Music From 12:00 noon to 1:00 p.m. By Mel Hauck & Associates

2¢ A POUND
RIDES ALL
DAY

SHELDON SKI - HI DIVERS
(Parachute Jumpers) 1:00 P.M.

PRIZES PRIZES
Bring Your Own
Tie Downs

Airport Dedication At 1:30 p.m.
PUBLIC INVITED TO ENJOY BREAKFAST FOR 50¢ - \$1.00 - PANCAKES AND SAUSAGE

boost the economy of the area. It is not known at this time what happened to the original small airfield.

A second push for an airport began thirty years later and came to fruition with a bond sale for \$41,000 to purchase land west of Slayton in 1966. Slayton was the only county seat without an airport in the whole southwest region of the state and the Civic and Commercial Association felt it was holding the economy of the town back. This time a state-of-the-art field was established and an Open House Dedication Celebration was held in 1969. A morning fly in breakfast started with a special greeting by Miss Minnesota contestant Patti Sorenson. Sky divers thrilled the crowds. This time plane rides cost two cents per pound!

Before the larger municipal airports began, local farmers hosted airfields on their property. Some even went so far as to provide a building to house locally owned planes. The Fulda airport is one of those examples. According to a news article in the Murray County Herald, in the summer of 1946 a new airport opened up on the Jack Janssen farm

Slayton Airport Dedication, MCH, 1969.

just north of Fulda. On staff, as manager and flight instructor, was Art Grane who had been an instructor at the Victory Field in Minneapolis. He offered classes in a brand new 46 Cub and also a Stearman bi-plane. Jack Janssen had learned how to fly from Grane. But what goes up must come down and Janssen eventually crashed a plane while taking a friend back to his military duties. They were not critically hurt. The Janssen airfield fell into disuse after 1952.

Another rural airfield was the Ralph Smith (Smithy) airfield a few miles north of Lake Wilson. Ralph flew himself and hosted other flyers and their planes. After World War II, men who had learned to fly in the



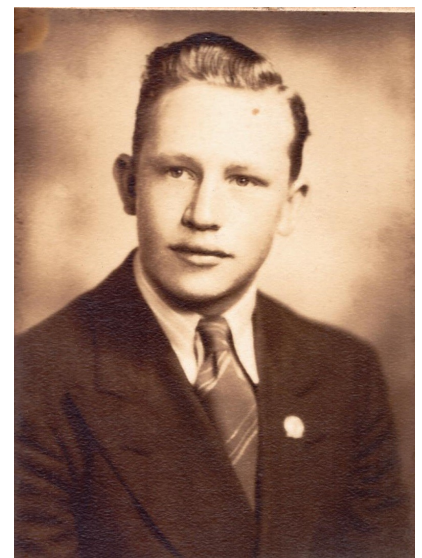
Lyle Sierk (l) and Jake Smith (r) in front of Sierk's Stearman Bi-plane, circa 1945. Smith family collection.

service offered flying lessons and served as pilots for aerial sprayers. One of the most spectacular local crashes after WWII happened on the Ralph Smith airfield in 1946. On September 1, two men were killed when the plane they were in crashed just after take-off.

Lyle Sierk grew up on a Lake Wilson farm with his twin brother Leon not more than a mile from the Smithy airfield. He was a decorated Army Airforce pilot who had joined the service before the US entered WWII. He was at Pearl Harbor during the bombing and came back to the US to go into flight training.

He was stationed in southern Italy through the rest of the war and flew 20 bomber missions. He was the first American pilot to land on Russian soil after two engines on his bomber became disabled. He and his crew spent several hours on the ground fixing the engines and then flew back to their Allied airbase. After he returned from the war, Sierk shuttled military planes around the country to different airbases. Neighbor and friend, Jake Smith, recalled Sierk's practical joke when he flew a B-17 at tree top level over their farm on one occasion. It took all afternoon for Smith to round up his cattle that had fled through the fence! Jake was taking flight lessons from Sierk who was the instructor at the Smithy field in 1946.

On the fateful day in September, Sierk had been taking people up for rides and about 100 people had gathered that afternoon to watch and take rides. He was using his own Stearman bi-plane for most of the day. For some reason he decided to make the last flight of the day in Melvin Stewart's Ryan PT 22 Recruiter. Stewart was another pilot instructor at the airfield. Roger Nepp, an eighteen-year-old



Roger Nepp graduated the spring of 1945. Nepp family photo collection.

from Lake Wilson chose to go along for a ride. Nepp had just graduated from high school that spring and was slated to head to college with his older brother Howard, who was still serving in the military. Roger, nicknamed “Doc” by his friends, hopped in and Sierk took the plane up.

Witnesses said that the plane was just up to about 100 feet and, as it banked left, stalled and fell to earth. It looked like Sierk tried

hard to bring it out of the stall but was unable to bring it back. In later years, airplane experts claim that the PT22 was a dangerous airplane to fly due to heavier wings and a different center of gravity than its



military predecessor, the PT21. Sierk’s unfamiliarity with the plane’s quirks may have been part of the reason for the fatal accident.

Airplanes became the vehicle for aerial photography during WWI. A stable camera that could withstand the bouncing of a plane was developed by Sherman Fairchild. After the war years that same Fairchild camera became standard for commercial photography use. In 1938, the county hired a photographer to create an aerial plat map of the landscape. This map became helpful to farmers planning their crop rotations and farm program plans as farmers could get a copy of the photograph of their farm from above. In 1938 Charles Smith, of Cameron township, utilized their aerial photograph to draw out their field plans for their first year of farming in Murray County.

The county had aerial photos completed in 1938 and 1968. Other commercial photographers began low altitude flyovers of farmsteads and then went door to door selling the photos. Many farmhouses proudly exhibit an aerial view of their most prized possession. Today satellites take the aerial photos with pinpoint accuracy. Drones also monitor the skies with aerial photographs.

Far from planning commercial flights were those intrepid local inventors who wanted to build their own flying machines. Robert Forrest, of the Lake Wilson Pilot, claimed that early pilot Otto Timm built his own flying machine. The most well-known

Aerial shot of the C. Smith half section in Cameron township, 1938. Note the markings designating crop planning. Smith family photo collection.

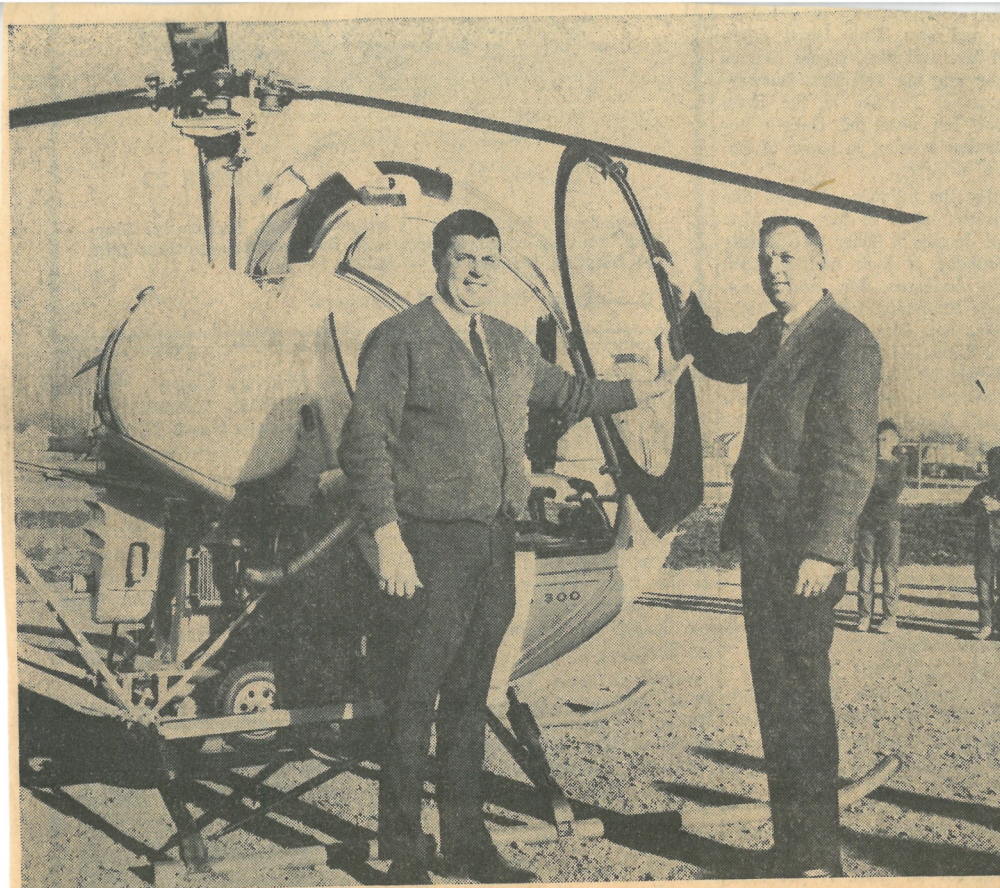
homemade flying machine was Sidney Foster's "Breezy." Built from a kit and powered with a continental engine, Breezy had open fret work and two seats. It took about two years to build and when it was finished in 1975, Foster built an airstrip on his farm. To get airborne he added a ramp at the end of the runway for a boost.

Unfortunately, Foster died of cancer in 1981. In an effort to keep the airplane in the county local residents raised money to purchase the plane and donated it to the museum. The museum had no place to reconstruct the plane or display it and the county commissioners would not allow it to be placed on the fairgrounds. Breezy was re-sold to a person who planned to rebuild and fly it.



Sydney Foster and passenger Lou Timmerman ready to go up for a ride in Breezy, circa 1976. MCHS collection.

Airplanes were not the only flying machines to grace the skies of Murray County. In 1968, the owner of Barry Construction, Hilary Barry, purchased and learned to fly a Hughes Helicopter. According to a Murray County Herald news article of the time, it was one of the few privately owned helicopters in the



A FIRST FOR THIS AREA in every respect was the arrival of this helicopter in Lake Wilson Saturday afternoon. The machine, a Hughes, was recently acquired by Barry Construction of Lake Wilson. Pictured with it are Hilary Barry, head of the firm, and Norm Jacobson, salesman and flight instructor for Hughes. Barry has been taking lessons to fly the "whirlybird" himself. It is one of the few privately owned helicopters in the state outside of the metropolitan areas, and the first to be put in use in the tri-state area. Barry says he will use it to expedite the arrival of parts and skilled personnel between jobs during the construction season.

Hilary Barry next to his 1968 Hughes helicopter. MCH. March 4, 1968)

state, and would be used to deliver parts and personnel to the company's job sites around the region. The two-person whirlybird was also a great hit with area children who went for rides with Hilary.

Today, airplanes and helicopters ply the county airspace spraying crops, carrying travelers, and providing emergency flights for hospitals. Seldom do people glance skyward, the technology no longer fascinates. From Astronaut Deke Slayton and his relationship to the town's founder to homemade airplanes, Murray County still has a strong connection to the age of air.

Lunchbox Lectures

Two lectures remain to be published in this year's Lunchbox Lecture Series. All of this year's lectures are posted on our website where they will remain for you to view at your leisure! To access the presentations, go to our website at historicmurray.org and look for the 'Recent Posts' section. Give us a call if you have any questions about how to access the presentations. We are here to help!

Tentative Schedule:

November 12: 2020 Cemetery Tour PowerPoint

December 10: Draining the Great Oasis; Narrated PowerPoint by Janet Timmerman

January 14: Murray County in the 1920s PowerPoint

February 11: Railroads of Murray County; Jakob Etrheim

March 11: Baseball Interview with Bill Bolin; Pulled from the MCHS Archive

April 8: Frank Thayer—An Architect's Story; by Rose Moudry



A Word from the Director by Janet Timmerman

"However mean your life is, meet it and live it; do not shun it and call it hard names."

Henry David Thoreau, Walden

I guess if this pandemic has taught me anything, it is that history is made on a day by day basis by folks like us just getting to the end of the tunnel as best we can. That is all any historic figure has done. Only in great distance of time can we look at it in its entirety and say, "This was a hard time!"

Every day has had its challenges, such as staying safe from disease, and its joys, like being able to Zoom with grandchildren and friends. Just think how isolating the 1918 pandemic was for families quarantined at home on distant farmsteads without even a phone. My main complaint has been foggy glasses! How trivial is that?

Now the tunnel is looking brighter, and we are looking forward to summer. The Front Porch Music Series is again in the works for July and August. Perhaps distanced on the lawn and with safety protocols in place. Until then we hope you are enjoying the Dinehart Lectures on-line. It has been a learning experience. Look for the March presentation to be an oral interview with Bill Bolin on baseball from 2016. We thought you would enjoy hearing his stories again as baseball season kicks off. Keep your spirits up and we will meet again soon.



find us on **facebook**



The Murray County Historical Society updates its Facebook page on a regular basis with upcoming events, behind the scenes work, and interesting artifacts! Be sure to hit "Like" to get post notifications!

Railroad Crews in Murray County Met with Unexpected Challenge by End-o-Line Site Coordinator, Jakob Etrheim

As many of you know, arial flooding has been a major issue in Murray County for decades. While researching railroad history in Murray County, I discovered this interesting story related to our area's flooding. The first railroad built into Murray county reached the Fulda area around February 1879. The railroad company responsible for the build was the Southern Minnesota Railroad, which would later be acquired by the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad (commonly nicknamed 'the Milwaukee Road'). The Southern continued building railroad tracks west of Fulda, eventually reaching Pipestone during the fall of that year. When the track crews started building through the Chanarambie Valley that summer, they experience some major difficulties. An area correspondent from the Lost Timbers region wrote to the Worthington Advance the following column on July 7, 1879:

"A terrible storm passed through here last Friday night. It blew, hailed, and rained, thundered, and lightened dreadfully. It seemed as if the heavens were robed in a cloak of rage. It tore down shanties and riddled tents as it went up the valley. Large quantities of provisions were destroyed by the pouring rain, shanties were blown to pieces, clothing was swept away, several men were badly hurt, and some limbs were broken. The Chanarambie Creek that flows down the valley, a stream that a man can [in normal conditions] step across, was swollen in the morning enough to float a steamboat."

The shanties mentioned in the article are the temporary housing for the railroad building crews. Its unclear how many men were working on this crew. During the same time in on a different railroad, it was reported 700 men were working on the project of grading roadbed and building track from Heron Lake to Pipestone through Murray County. Most track building was done by hand with very few power equipment. Steam powered shovels and cranes would have been utilized for large moving.

The column continues: "Some damage was done to the grade along the valley. It is with great effort that the work is being carried on. Some shanties that were in the valleys were flooded so that occupants were obliged to climb on the roofs. The water rose to the height of eight feet on flats. Beds, bedding, kettles, pans, pails, and cookstoves floated with the ebbing tide! The fords were impassable for several days and are not yet in a very convenient conditions for teamsters" Once the water retreated a couple days later, the crews continued building West and reached Edgerton by early October 1879. The first train traveled through the area and arrived to Pipestone by Thanksgiving Day of 1879



Harold Welgraven discovered these stumps near the old railroad bed on his land. This is believed to be the 1880 site where an attempt to dig a well was unsuccessful. Image from "Village of Chandler: Our Town History."

A year later in 1880, a crew was sent to the head of the Chanarambie Creek to drill a well to provide a water supply for the trains. According to reports, they dug as deep as 70 feet when it caved in; losing their equipment in the process. After a second attempt, the crew eventually moved into Section one of Moulton township where they had better success drilling a well. They were able to establish a well with a water tower and windmill. These were the first structures built in the area. Eventually, the area near the water tower was platted for a town site and settlers began moving to the area. This town site is known today as the village of Chandler.

Happenings at the Murray County Museum

By: Rose Moudry Site Coordinator/Collections Manger



Can you believe 2020 is already over? Last year flew by so quickly and now I find myself nearly two months into 2021! Since my last update I have been continuing on with some of the same projects and have started in on several new ones.

Exhibits: 1) The school display refreshing is nearly coming to a close — sort of — since we are always receiving new artifacts and uncovering new information, I will always be adding new things to the exhibit as time goes on! But for now, all the exhibit cases and interpretative information is in order and is ready for visitors to check out.

2) MCHS Board President Brian Harmsen built a beautiful reader rail for the transportation exhibit which is the last major piece that had to go in to place. From there I am just tying up loose ends and will be opening the South Wing to the public in the coming month.

3) Refreshing the school display left a vignette empty in the main exhibit gallery. In this empty space I am working on putting together a new exhibit on clubs and organizations in Murray County.



Brian Harmsen next to the new reader rail.

4) The Native American display refresh will be starting up shortly. This refreshed display will include information on communication, the Oasis Culture, and the LaFramboise Trading Post at Bear Lake.

Collections: 1) Working on entering all the items that were accepted at the last Collections Committee meeting.

2) I am currently putting together a Legacy Gant application to rehouse and inventory all the oversized rolled documents in the collection.

3) Finally, each year I like to pick at least one semi-large collections project to work on. Last year I worked on the books, the Muesing Drug Store, and the slide collection. This year I am going to tackle a collection of license plates and a collection of umbrellas. I will be inventorying and rehousing these items throughout the year.

As per usual it is pretty busy around the museum so far this year—just the way I like it!

Many Thanks for Your Donations and Memorials!

Life Member Donations:

Maxine Silvernale

Lorna Bader

Rosemary Letendre

General Fund Donation:

Judith and Leo Voss

Janice Del Calzo

Luann Parker

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Connie Toner in memory of Sherman "Sam" Toner

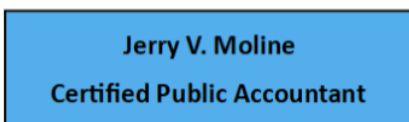
If we missed your name as a donor, please contact Janet to make sure we have your donation on our list. We are deeply grateful for every donation and memorial. The Murray County Historical Society, is a non-profit, 501(c)(3). Donors may deduct their contributions as directed in the US Income Tax Code.

The society's tax number can be given upon request.

We Thank Our 2021 MCHS Business Members!



Business	Members Since
Almich's Market	2020
Chandler Co-Op	2020
Hoffmann Construction	2020
Jerry V. Moline CPA	2020
Left Bank Roasterie and Cafe	2020
Rooster's On/Off Sale Liquor	2020
Slayton Area Chamber of Commerce	2011
Slayton Building Materials, Inc.	2019
Spartz Plumbing & Heating, Inc.	2020
State Bank of Chandler	2003
VIP Floral and Garden Center	2020



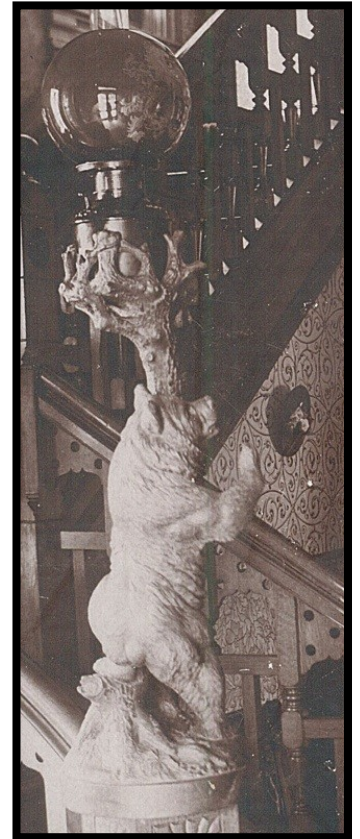
If you or someone you know would like more information about becoming a business membership, contact the museum by phone or email.

Final Push for Dinehart Bear Fundraiser



In 1893 Christopher Dinehart took his award-winning wheat to the Chicago World's Fair. While there, he picked up a business card for a famous house of woodcarvers from Brienz, Switzerland. We believe the fruits of that card are the hand carved Black Forest bears that once graced the newel posts of the grand staircase. In 1996 the bears were sold out of the house. In the summer of 2019, the owners of the bears approached us to see if the historical society would like to purchase them back for the original amount and restore the bears to their rightful place in the Dinehart Holt House. The total cost of returning the bears will be \$10,000.

Over the last year and a half we have been hard at work raising the funds to return the bears home. At \$8,460 raised, we are almost to our goal! If you would like to help us bring the bears home send donations to the Murray County Historical Society and be sure to make note it is for the bears. We are excited about this possibility. The MCHS Board is committed to making this a reality!



2021 Membership Renewal

Membership support allows us to develop new exhibits, host in person and socially distanced programs, and care for all the artifacts and archives in the Murray County Historical Society collection.

We truly appreciate all renewing and new members. It is that time of year again where we like to encourage all current members to consider renewing their membership for the upcoming year. Are you a lifetime member or have you already renewed for 2021? Consider purchasing a membership for a family member or friend. Memberships make great gifts! Thank you again for all the support you show us here at the Murray County Historical Society!



2021 Murray County Historical Society Membership



Name

Address

Phone

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Check One

☐ Annual Membership \$15.00

☐ Family Membership \$25.00

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Method of Payment

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Murray County Historical Society

2848 29th Street

PO Box 61

Slayton, MN 56172

(507) 836-6533



Self Interview

We are living in a unique era of American history. Future historians, and our own descendants, will want to know how this pandemic affected the lives of rural people. In an effort to collect as many viewpoints, experiences, and stories as possible about how Covid-19 has affected county residents, we are calling on everyone, young and old, to complete this Covid-19 Self Interview.

There are no right or wrong responses. Feel free to skip any question you prefer not to answer. Answers can be handwritten, typed, or even recorded.

Download a copy of the Covid-19 Self Interview at the following link:
<https://murraycountyhistoricalsociety.org/covid-19-self-interview/>

Extra: Have you or someone you know experienced Covid-19? We are collecting written accounts of Murray County residents who have contracted the Covid-19 Virus. If you contracted the virus, consider writing down your experience and donating it to the Murray County Historical society Covid-19 Archive. Upon request, experience records can be sealed for a set number of years before they would be open for researchers to view.

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