

Memories of “Ben’s”

by Nancy Snyder

Anyone who grew up in Rushford or the surrounding area between 1927 and 1968 likely has memories of “Ben’s” - correctly named Niggle’s Cafe. Besides being a businessman in town and ardent supporter of any and all Rushford Trojans athletic teams Ben owned the restaurant in town

that was the #1 place to be during the day, but especially after a Friday night game. Several people who grew up in the era of “Ben’s” responded to my question “What is your favorite memory of Niggle’s Cafe?”

Many responses were in regard to the food. “Like sour cream raisin pie made by Valborg Haugen-nothing better!” Many remembered having a glazed doughnut from the Rushford Bakery (across the street) topped with a scoop of either vanilla or chocolate ice cream. Malts, milkshakes, French fries with tartar sauce, fountain drinks all were mentioned as memories lasting to this day. School kids would go to Ben’s over the lunch break for the day’s special...hot beef and gravy sandwiches with mashed potatoes and a fountain Coke, burgers and fries, hot dogs priced so reasonably that even high school kids could afford them. Apparently, there was a bucket of raw French fries sitting in water that always sat just inside the back door, waiting to be thrown in the grease to fill an order. Wouldn’t be able to do that today.



Niggle’s Café opened at 104 W. Jessie Street in 1927 and continued for 41 years until October 1968 when it was sold to John and Ethel Yonts. It’s the third building from the left in the photo. (Cutting Edge Fitness is now located at that address.)

We all remember crowding into the narrow restaurant after a Friday night game, 6 (or more) kids to a booth, sharing fries with a friend, standing shoulder to shoulder filling the aisle if you weren't lucky enough to get a booth, answering the counter phone when it rang because you were the closest and none of the restaurant employees could get to the phone fast enough. The bathrooms, described as akin to a cattle corral or something from a murder movie.

The gum stuck under the booth tables. Layers and layers and layers of old dried wads of gum. How many years old were the wads in the layer closest to the table? Decks of cards balanced on the wooden chair rail in the farthest back booths, waiting for the older male patrons who met for a regular game of cards. The restaurant was always open. Red opened up in the morning, Ben closed up at night, but only after the very last country kid had been safely picked up by parents for the ride home.

The waitresses. Helmina Hoiseth and her bright red lipstick, never batting an eye while witnessing shenanigans

that naturally came with crowds of teenagers. Jeannie Marin and all the others, including Red and Ben. Patience and tolerance understanding kids will be kids.

My own dad recounted that home-coming WWII soldiers would get as far as LaCrosse (in his case) on the train, then call Ben's. The restaurant was always open, there was a phone that would always get answered, and Ben would make sure someone would drive to LaCrosse or wherever to pick up the returning service person.



Ben Niggle

Ben's, Niggle's...whatever your choice of words, was an institution. It was a restaurant, and so much more. It served the community in countless ways. You could depend on it to welcome you in no matter what your age or circumstance. Food, friends, fun. It was all there.



Photo courtesy Norm Ebner

THE NIGGLE CAFÉ in downtown Rushford was a busy place in 1938, three years before the start of World War II. Employees behind the counter are (left to right): Clara Eggert and Mrs. Halverson, both cooks; Helmina Hoiseth, Melvin (Red) Christopherson, and Ben Niggle. Customers at the counter: Hans Bartleson, Vance Bartleson, Art Swenson, Ted Colbenson, Norman Berg, and unknown.

My hope is this has taken you on a little trip down memory lane. What's your favorite memory of Ben's?

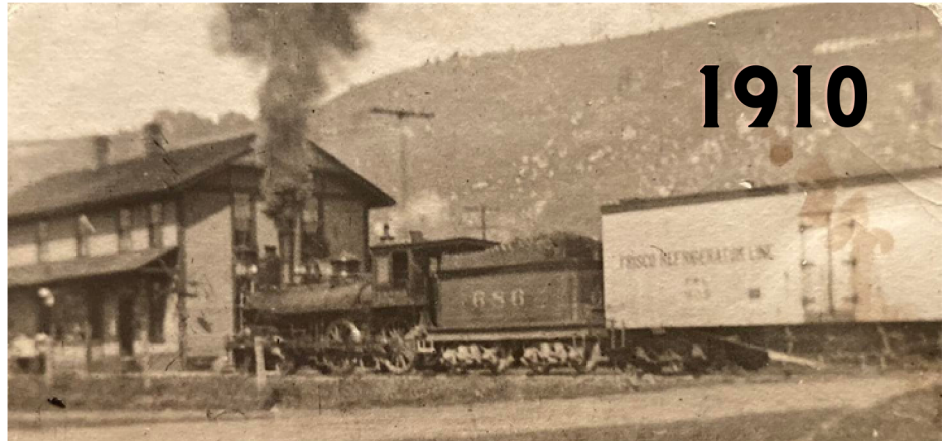


The Railroad Arrives and the Depot Begins

by Jackie Becker

The Southern Minnesota Railroad line blew its first whistle on January 1, 1867 at the Rushford station. Constructed in 1867 as a one-story building, the Depot became the center of excitement and activity on the arrival and departure of the trains. In 1868, the gray, swaybacked Depot added a second level to become the residency for the Depot agent's family.

The Southern Minnesota Railroad ran from LaCrosse, Wisconsin, to Austin, Minnesota, before being bought out by the Milwaukee Railroad. The railroad was the lifeblood of Rushford in the boom years of the city becoming a commercial center for southeast



Minnesota and northern Iowa. But as the boom years dwindled, so did the need for the railroad. The last passenger train stopped in Rushford in 1975 and the last freight train left town in 1980. When the railroad closed the line, the Depot became storage for a local business.

In 1987 the Rushford Area Historical Society (RAHS) purchased the Depot for \$10,000. Restoration began through grant writing, fundraising, and volunteer help. In the early years the Depot housed the telegraph and post office and was a popular gathering place and communication center. Through much hard work, RAHS restored the building to be a visitor's center, museum, and genealogy research center. The museum displays artifacts and stories from area people, organizations, and businesses.

Next to the Depot the railway bed became the Root River State Bike Trail in 1988. The Depot houses the visitor's center which provides local and regional travel information and restrooms for those using the trail.

In 1986 the Southern Minnesota Depot in Rushford was added to the National Register of Historic Places. It is thought to be the last two-story depot standing in its original location on the Southern Minnesota Railroad line.

In 2007, Rushford was inundated with a historic flood. The damage was substantial to the foundation. Today, RAHS is working hard to repair this damage by writing grants, fundraising, and the help of volunteers. This historic site is a part of the Rushford community and needs to be preserved for future generations to enjoy, just as the previous generations when Rushford was a gateway between the industrialized East and the frontier West.

PRESIDENT'S NOTES

by Terri Benson

The Rushford Area Historical Society continues to make progress on delivering the mission of preserving and sharing the stories of the community. Our board thanks all who have donated to this important community organization.

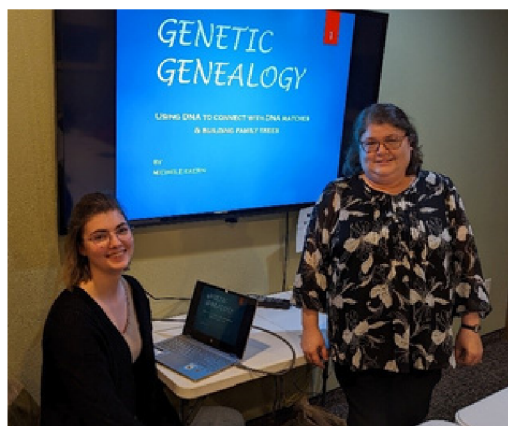
The RAHS board members have been busy this year - organizing the artifacts of history in new displays, receiving additional historical items, improving the buildings' interiors and exteriors, and working on plans for the major renovations on the Depot. Be sure to read through the Year in Review to catch up on all the good stuff being done.

One of the community projects done in 2023 enhanced the exterior of the jail. A local Scout, Jonah Buchanan, chose this project to accomplish his Eagle Scout achievement. He installed a brick sidewalk from the bike trail to the jail door and installed window screens to keep the birds from nesting in the jail. It was a community effort and really made the jail a part of the historic park. Next steps are to update the interior with the police chiefs office and the jail cell with authentic artifacts, to capture the essence of what it was like "back in the day."



We THANK Jonah for his hard work getting this project completed.

This year, the RAHS board wanted to encourage more interactive activities. We have been working with Michele Ekern (pictured below with her daughter) on developing ways to educate those interested in genealogy. She came to our March meeting and shared the extensive options in digging into a family's genealogy background. Then in November RAHS put on a beginners class to start the exploration process with Michele. Watch for more classes - advertised on our website, through Facebook and posters around town.



The time donated by our board is always impressive and I would like to take this time to THANK all who give their time and energy to your historical society. Each one of the board members has aided in delivering on the mission of preserving our history. From writing grants, greeting guests from out of town and taking on "to-do" lists around the historic park - everyone pitches in.

If you would like to assist these awesome board members and volunteer, let us know, we would love to have you be a part of the team!

RAHS Board Members:

Terri Benson, Pres. - Kari Meyer, VP
Jack O'Donnell, Treas. - Sally Ryman, Sec.
Anne Spartz, Historian
Jackie Becker, Dir. - Nancy Snyder, Dir.

YEAR IN REVIEW

January – Received Arlin Falck and MiEnergy grants; planning meeting established goals 2023

February – Barbershop and hairdresser artifact display created; improved electrical light switches in the middle museum room and outlets in the office area; fundraising letters sent to expanded mailing list

March – Beginners Genetic Genealogy & Family Tree Building training held; Jack and Terri terms renewed & officers were reelected; members were surveyed on best way to reach out to individuals; Jackie and Sally attended the Fillmore County History Partners meeting in Fountain

April – Visitors' center opened for the season; Wolfram sisters donated display cases from the Hart Store; tonsorial industry was featured in the monthly email; Repair and Preserve Fundraiser "railroad track" sign was hung on the east exterior wall

May – The underground railroad was featured in the monthly email

June – Henry Stage's gravesite was discussed. Stage was a Civil War veteran, 7th Minnesota Infantry, Company K, and active in the community

July – RAHS board members sold t-shirts during Rushford Days; pictures and other memorabilia were loaned to high school reunion celebrants; Jonah Buchanan completed the jail house screens and landscaping for his Eagle Scout project

August – Biking Across Minnesota participants were greeted at Creekside Park by RAHS board members and given ideas for things to do while in Rushford

September – Hundreds of Ride the Ridges bicyclists used the depot as a rest stop

October – Kim King from Rooted Learning Company brought 20+ school children to tour the museum buildings

November – The Minnesota Historical Society's Historic Resources Advisory Committee has recommended approval of our \$254,953 grant for depot foundation stabilization construction; Michele Ekern led a Beginners Family Tree Building class using familytree.org; visitors' center was closed for the season

FINANCIAL REPORT

The Rushford Area Historical Society (RAHS) received donations from community members, visitors to the depot, sales of t-shirts, and grants. This income covered expenses and left a net income of \$2,818.

RAHS invested grants received last year in a CD. RAHS is taking advantage of good interest rates as we continue to raise funds for the roof and other repairs to preserve the depot.

	2021 Actual	2022 Actual	2023 (11/30)
Income			
Donations	\$ 8,369	\$ 6,287	\$ 8,736
Sale of Items	\$ 446	\$ 1,485	\$ 355
Miscellaneous Income	\$ 9,663	\$ 311	\$ 1,162
Grants for Depot	\$ -	\$ 61,500	\$ 1,896
Total Income	\$ 18,478	\$ 69,583	\$ 12,149
Expense			
General/Office	\$ 2,331	\$ 1,906	\$ 2,466
T-shirts	\$ -	\$ 1,003	\$ 831
Building	\$ 6,990	\$ 4,739	\$ 6,028
Sales Tax for Items Sold	\$ 10	\$ 9	\$ 5
Project - Architect Fees	\$ -	\$ 12,628	\$ -
Refund to MN Historical Society	\$ -	\$ 3,373	\$ -
Total Expense	\$ 9,332	\$ 23,658	\$ 9,331
Net Income	\$ 9,146	\$ 45,925	\$ 2,818

Fund Balances			
	2021 (12/6)	2022 Actual	2023 (12/4)
Checking	\$ 14,904	\$ 61,394	\$ 13,327
Savings (log cabin)	\$ 994	\$ 1,130	\$ -
Money Market	\$ 13,449	\$ 13,486	\$ 13,993
CD (grants-depot roof/repairs)	\$ -	\$ -	\$ 52,638
Total	\$ 29,346	\$ 76,010	\$ 79,959



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