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Rhinelanders Revisited: A new column spotlighting the rich history of the Hodag city

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River News Feature Writer

A born and raised Hodag, my family has been in the Rhinelanders area for generations. Growing up, I can remember my parents and grandparents reminiscing about the Rhinelanders of their youth - five and dime stores, enjoying social outings at Hodag Park, chatting with friends and neighbors down Brown Street on a Friday night.

Nearing the end of my own youth, I realize now I took that storytelling for granted. I didn't appreciate it at the time either because I couldn't relate or I didn't care to dwell on the past. Flashforward to the present. After spending some time away from our little town and returning home, I've gained a newfound appreciation for our exceptional community, and part of that recognition has compelled me to return to my roots and chronicle the oral histories I grew up listening to.

In an effort to spotlight these historical anecdotes, I encourage those interested to reach out in candid conversation to share your stories, in the hopes of preserving Rhinelanders' rich oral history. Those interested can connect via email at stephanie@rivernewsjournal.com or call our office at (715) 365-6397. Readers can also look forward to reading a column spotlighting historical anecdotes of Rhinelanders' past.

I would like to thank Rhinelanders Historical Society President Bill Vancos and Pioneer Park Historical Complex Director Kerry Bloedorn for taking the time to be my historical liaisons, and for those others who have been so kind to share their stories.

In the meantime, however, it seems only fitting for us to start at the beginning.

Some of us may know the Rhinelanders Story, and others may not. For those like me, who missed this history lesson, let's do a quick review: in the mid- to late-1800s, there wasn't a whole lot of action happening in the Northwoods of Wisconsin.

But, let's keep our historical lenses intact; this perspective is one-sided.

Actually, Native American presence predates Wisconsin statehood and the majority of early settlers, but their histories weren't recorded in the same sense as their white counterparts.

Although the story of our small community doesn't start until the 1870s or so, I feel it's important to mention here that we remember those histories which are preserved, and often, it's those marginalized groups whose stories go unheard.

Which brings us to those prominent players whose stories will forever be tied to the history of Rhinelanders - enter the Brown family. The year is 1872, the name of the game is logging and the pickings were good.

"The Brown family, their patriarch (Edward) D. Brown who was from New York originally... found himself buying



Rhinelanders exploded as an infant logging community once the Soo Line and Milwaukee Lake Shore and Western Railroad came to town in the 1880s. River News archive photo.

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a piece of property in Stevens Point, which at that time was the southern tip of the Northwoods Pinery of Wisconsin," Bloedorn began. "So as they continued to cut those trees down, the Wisconsin River became a big mode of transportation... to send (logs) from the adjacent forest to the mills, which were springing up along the river."

"All along the Wisconsin River in the 1800s, there were these river stations," he continued. "They were basically trading posts where people could get supplies, stop for a break, that sort of thing. If you consider at the time no roads, no railroads, the river was like a highway."

Edward's eldest son, Anderson W. Brown trekked up the Wisconsin River from Stevens Point with Anson P. Vaughn to cruise timber for the Brown patriarch. When they reached the confluence of the Wisconsin and Pelican Rivers - then referred to as "Pelican Rapids" by early settlers - they found, to their delight, an 18-mile by 40-mile track of virgin pinery.

"(Anderson) thought, wow this not only would be a great little town site here, but there's so many resources," Bloedorn continued, "the dollar signs were probably just like 'ching ching ching' as they walked around the area."

But despite the strategic location of the Wisconsin River (and the vast lumber resources spanning the area), the going price for the land was only \$1.50 per acre because of the treacherous waterfalls south of the confluence which often blocked up large logs driven downstream.

"It was a real challenge to not get these logs bundled up at waterfalls and things like that," Vancos noted. "That's why Rhinelanders really wasn't considered as a valuable logging place in the beginning, and that's why the Browns were able to come up here and buy this land, because other people had dismissed it. They were thinking old-school, that you had to float (the logs) down to Point or Wausau. The Browns started thinking out of the box ... but for that they needed the dam, and they needed the railroad to get their product to market."

Although others before them had dismissed the value of this land, the Browns were opportunists - they saw the potential, having had the foresight to envision sawmills located right at the site of logging, rather than sending logs down the river.

In order to make that dream come to fruition, however, the Browns had to lay down a few more cards.

By 1874, Anderson convinced his father to make the investment together with his uncle Thomas W. Anderson and second eldest brother Webster E. Brown. The four investors bought up 1,500 acres, but they know they're just sitting on inaccessible land - and a hefty investment - because without road or rail, there was no way to bring all that lumber to market.

But the Browns, always with their ear to the ground, heard the Milwaukee Lake Shore and Western Railroad had plans to put in a rail line from Milwaukee to Ontonagon, Mich., and it was going to come within 15 miles of Rhinelanders. So, being the opportunists they were, they petitioned fellow New Yorker and president of the railroad, Frederick W. Rhinelanders. (In some accounts, Mr. Rhinelanders' name is spelled without the K, however the local historians with whom we've consulted have suggested the correct spelling is Frederick).

"So they're holding onto this land because they know it's valuable, but they know they can't make a profit out of it yet because they don't know how to get the lumber (to market)," Vancos explained. "So that's when in 1878, they approached the railroad and said, 'What would it take for you guys to put this 15-mile spur into Rhinelanders so we can have access to it?' They built a beautiful business case for it: how many loads of lumber the train would be hauling, how the community would grow."

"So they made a good case for that, but they also said, 'Tell you what, we're going to do to sweeten the pot: we'll give you half of our land. So we've got 1,500 acres now up here, we'll give you half of that,'" he continued. "Well you might say, well what good is land to a railroad? Well land can be sold to generate money. So that was a valuable thing to offer them, a piece of land they could sell to turn into money so they could extend their lines."

"Then, to absolutely sweeten it - because they were leaving no stone left unturned - they offered to name the city after the president... Talk about schmoozing!" Vancos chuckled. "It was just the fact that Mr. Rhinelanders was the president of the railroad, the Browns needed the railroad, and so they cut a deal with him."

But that deal didn't end with Mr. Rhinelanders and Milwaukee Lake Shore and Western Railroad.

"About four years later, they found out that the Soo Line was coming across the state of Wisconsin, and the plans called for it to cross the Wisconsin River down by Tomahawk," Vancos continued. "So they approached the Soo Line and said, 'What would it take to entice you to move your railroad up 25 miles and cross the Wisconsin River at Rhinelanders instead of Tomahawk?' It's really a funny story because they went and said, 'Well what are you offering?' then the Browns said, 'Well we'll give you half of our land.'"

"The Soo Line - I don't know if they were smarter or what - they said, 'Well we know the history here; we know you gave the other railroad company 750 acres, and now you're offering us half of your 750 acres,'" he continued. "They countered and said, 'Well we want a third of the total land.'"

"So the Browns actually went back to the first railroad, the Milwaukee Lake Shore, and convinced them to give some of their land up so the three parties - the Browns and each of the railroads - would each have a third of that land," Vancos said. "It was unheard of for a railroad to give up land and entice a competitor to come into an area that they're already servicing. It was just unheard of at the time."

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"I think the Milwaukee group realized that if this area had rail service that went in all four directions - north, south, east and west - that it would open this area up to a lot better positioning as far as incoming and outgoing freight," Vancos noted. "They were exactly right."

Now with transit to both Minneapolis and Chicago, the sawmill industry exploded, with the infant village of Rhinelanders at the forefront since its official establishment in 1882.

There were grandiose plans for Rhinelanders to be both a bustling mill town and the business hub of the Northwoods. In the original plat drawn that same year, six mill lots were strategically planned along the bank of what is now Hodag Park, with two additional lots on the other side. But with unregulated clear-cutting going unchecked, most of those mills would close by the turn of the century.

Stay tuned for the next installment of this continuing series

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