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### Rhineland Revisited: Chronicles of the unsung game changers

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The last installment of Rhineland Revisited merely scratched the surface of success for some of Rhineland's founding fathers; ultimately, their wealth and status allowed them to invest in many infant industries, but there were others who had a profound impact on our fledgling community. Oftentimes, however, their efforts were not chronicled in such detail as the Browns, Arthur Taylor or Dr. Daniels.

"The Brown family, and other families within the community that helped to build it, (they) had the opportunity because of their status - wealth status or otherwise - to name a street after themselves, after their company or whatever it happened to be," Pioneer Park Historical Complex Director Kerry Bloedorn commented. "But there were some people within the community who didn't have a lot of wealth but were impactful enough to have had a street named after them."

"So it's not to say their histories are not documented in some fashion," he continued. "But it's not quite as readily available."

In comparing those with status to those without, it becomes clear individuals with financial means were able to etch themselves a place in our historical record in ways others were not privy to. In this way, then, we return to the idea that the histories of marginalized groups often go unnoticed, even when their stories played an integral part in the history of a community.

Native Americans, for example, were the first to settle this area, but Anderson Brown is often credited as the founder of Rhineland. Likely hundreds of years before European settlers arrived, Native Americans spanning the region utilized rivers and other water routes for travel, and for this reason, the confluence of the Wisconsin and Pelican rivers became a strategic place for them to settle.

So too, the earliest land routes in Wisconsin were Indian foot trails that were later widened into tote roads big enough for wagons to bring supplies into the logging camps that soon spanned the region, Bloedorn commented. Those tote roads were made into even bigger roads when automobiles came along, then into highways and freeways in more recent history, effectively obliterating any archeological remains of the early trails.



In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, lumberjacks worked long and hard hours logging the untouched pinery of the Northwoods of Wisconsin. "People worked hard back in the old days," Rhineland Historical Society President Bill Vancos noted. "We can't comprehend that... They would log all winter, and then in the spring they would float (the logs) down the river to the sawmills." Pioneer Park Historical Complex archive photo.

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A natural spring is located where Monster Mart (and the adjacent lot to the north) most recently was located on Stevens Street. That spring enabled Arthur Taylor to strategically utilize its endless supply of free water to manufacture his soda products there. In retrospect, however, it's quite possible Native Americans originally recognized the potential of that spring when they settled here generations beforehand.

"To that point, I would imagine the Native American people who lived here knew all the best stuff," Bloedorn commented. "But none of them thought to set up shop at the spring and charge the other Indians a quarter to slurp off of it."

There was - and arguably, still continues to be - a great difference in cultural mindset between Native Americans and early European settlers.

While Native lifestyles promote harmony with nature, their white counterparts opted instead for the sentiment of Manifest Destiny. Of course, Native peoples' pioneering knowledge and know-how enabled them to settle the region, but their cultural beliefs did not promote the domination of those resources.

On the flipside, early white settlers had a different sentiment in mind, and for that, they have been remembered.

Even after European settlers arrived, the intimate connection between wealth and documented history remained intact.

For example, the Brown legacy is often cited as the predominant force that enabled Rhinelanders to become a bustling milltown, but what about the lumberjacks who actually performed the labor that fueled the Brown's industries?

While we can name every Brown brother and their various accomplishments, I would venture to guess most of us would be hard-pressed to recall names of individuals who logged this area (... and Paul Bunyan doesn't count).

At its heyday, hundreds of seasonal lumber camps employed thousands of young men. They worked long hours during the harvesting season, residing in wooden cabins near the northern tree groves. Most likely, many of those lumberjacks were of lower monetary and societal status - especially when we compare them to the Browns, Taylor or Daniels - and weren't the most highly-respected citizens.

"The lumberjacks, when they came into town on Saturday night to spend their money on wine, women and song, they weren't allowed to go downtown," Rhinelanders Historical Society President Bill Vancos noted. "I think it was the city fathers trying to be chivalrous, protecting the ladies of the town... So they gravitated to The Hollow. There were, I think at the time, seven (or so) bars down there, so that was where they really got to let loose. So it got the nickname 'The Hungry Hollow,' and now we just refer to it as 'The Hollow.'"

But that separation between "us" and "them" didn't end with the Native Americans and early loggers; it even infiltrated the circle of those we consider to be Rhinelanders' founding fathers.

Eugene (Gene) Shepard will forever be remembered for his Hodag hoax, but he was much more dynamic than some might assume. The writer Jack Corey quoted a New North article that defined Shepard as a "woodsman, artist, nature lover, storyteller and entertainer," who "undoubtedly was one of the most unusual personages to be found anywhere in the country."

Shepard was a highly-regarded surveyor and timber cruiser, having drawn some of the most accurate plats of Oneida and Vilas counties that they were accepted into court without question.

He actually came to this area two years before Anderson Brown ever scoped it out, working as an apprentice to Albert Webber in determining the value of pine stands throughout the upper Wisconsin River Valley.

In drawing many of those platbooks, Shepard named hundreds of lakes after family and friends; Lake Mildred, for example, was named after his first wife.

Aided by the story of his Hodag capture, he enthusiastically promoted the area as a vacation spot and summer home destination for well-to-do Chicagoans.

"Gene Shepard... he had a lot of pluses and a lot of minuses, but he was, without a doubt, the best cheerleader for this area," Vancos noted. "That's why he did the Hodag and his other pranks and marketing (ploys), to attract people to come up here."

"He was a troubled man," Vancos continued. "He made money then he lost money... When he died, the city fathers didn't even want to talk about the Hodag. He had burnt bridges with so many people... But there's just so many funny stories about him."

"People would actually come up on the train and he would meet them (there), walk them over to his house, and then they would peek in to see this Hodag, this creature they had heard about," he continued. "His boys hated it, they would get teased a lot - you know, 'your dad is that crazy guy with the Hodag.'"

"(Shepard) would have some sign (a whistle or bird call) to alert them, and the kids were expected... to go in, climb into the sawdust and pull the wires to move the Hodag and rub wood together to make weird sounds," Vancos laughed. "So they hated it, they did not like the Hodag at all."

All jokester tendencies aside, because Shepard was so familiar with the Northwoods, he befriended Native

American tribes residing in the area and even became fluent in their language, as Bloedorn noted. It's been suggested that while scoping out the shores of Lake Superior, Shepard may have been exposed to a pictograph of a creature called Mishipeshu, or the "water panther," a legend some Native American tribes still believe in to this day. Interestingly enough, those original pictographs share an eerie similarity to our beloved Hodag.

In retrospect, we'll never know for certain whether or not Shepard's Hodag was inspired by this Native American legend; there's so many circulating stories, but no clear consensus. Like a child's game of telephone, one can recognize how easily the line between fact and fiction becomes blurred when the same story is retold time again through the generations.

What's most interesting about Shepard is that he was valued not because he had a lot of money, but because of his wealth of knowledge. When he had silver, he spent it; but perhaps many of his ideas were brought to fruition by those who had the money to invest at the time. By that design, perhaps those who got the credit for starting an industry didn't always have the original idea in the first place. But, coming back to Shepard and the Hodag, perhaps - in this instance at least - what goes around comes around.

For me at least, it's fascinating to consider the fact that we don't readily remember Shepard for his accurate plots or extensive knowledge of the area, but instead, we know him as the prankster who conceived the Hodag. Now if we consider, if even for a moment, that this idea might have been borrowed, it becomes amusing to think about why we remember what we remember about the people we remember, especially if that's not the way the story really unfolded.

Stay tuned for the next installment of this continuing series.

Visit rivernewsonline.com to read the previous installments.

## Reader Comments

Posted: Wednesday, June 3, 2020

Article comment by: **Robert/Barb Thompson**

I am really enjoying you articles about Rhinelanders' past! I didn't know that Gene Shepard was so versatile! An Aunt of mine told me stories about him when she was an operator at the Rhinelanders Telephone Company. Thanks Bob Thompson

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