

Best Years

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Rhineland history — Fact or fiction?

By Joy Vancos

SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

Sometimes relating the facts of a community's history becomes like the child's game of "Telephone," where one person whispers a phrase into the ear of the next, repeating the action until the last person repeats the phrase out loud, usually sounding nothing like the original words used. If no one takes the time to record events as they actually happened, when stories are repeated years later, more often than not, the initial information becomes distorted.

There are several stories about Rhineland's beginnings which have become twisted a little as they have been handed down in the last 50 years or so. The first is that Frederick W. Rhineland, the New Yorker after whom the city was named, never saw the place. According to a report in *The New North*, Rhineland's first newspaper, Dec. 21, 1882, "The directors car of the Milwaukee Lake Shore & Western road came up to Rhineland last Friday, and a delegation of the officials, including President Rhineland and General Superintendent Reed, made *The New North* office a call. A photographer accompanied the



Submitted photo

F. W. Rhineland visited the new village carrying his name in the winter of 1882.

party and took a number of views of the town.

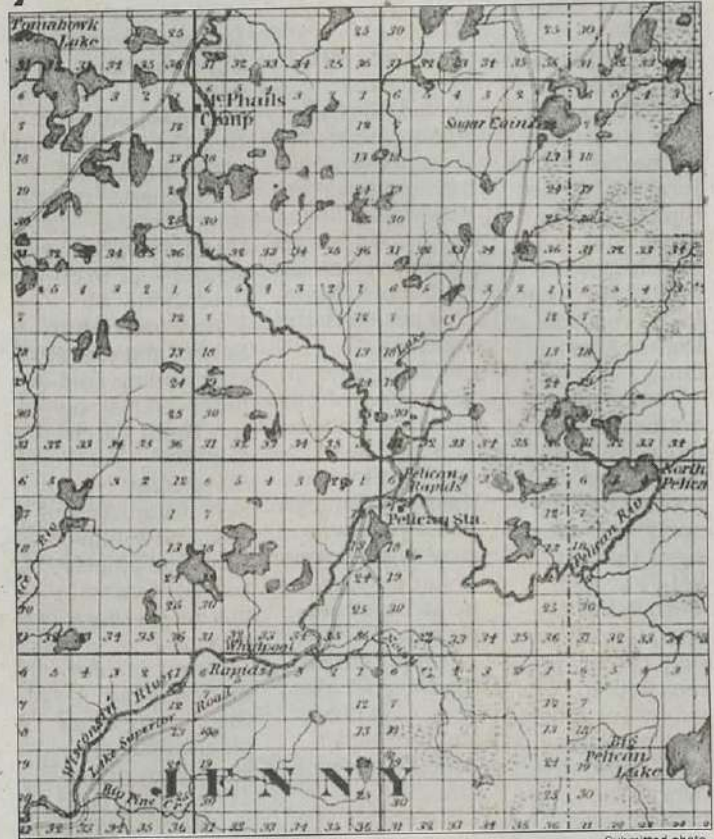
The second myth refers to the Brown Family. By now most everyone knows that the Browns — brothers, Anderson, Webster, Edward and their father, Edward D. Brown — founded Rhineland. They purchased property, built a sawmill and started a bank, E. D. Brown and Sons, now M&I. It has been reported by some that the father, E. D., never visited here. This is also not true. Not only did E. D. visit here, but he built a home on Frederick Street in 1894 and died here four years later. It has also been said that Oneida County was named after the county in New York in which E. D. Brown was born. But Brown, as well as his children, was born in Madison

County, N.Y.

A third piece of misinformation which is brought up yearly is that famed coach John Heisman owned and lived in the house on King Street which was the former parish house for St. Augustine. Heisman visited here at least once, but he did not live here. After he died in New York, his wife returned to Rhineland to live with her widowed sister, and his body was brought here and buried in Forest Home Cemetery.

The biggest piece of fiction concerns Pelican Rapids.

There was never a village here named Pelican Rapids. This stretch of the river was known throughout Wisconsin because of the number and size of the rapids in the Wisconsin River and was called Pelican



Submitted photo

In 1878, the area containing the present day Oneida County was part of the Town of Jenny in Lincoln County.

Rapids by the early 1870s. Newspapers around the state kept their eye on lumbering happenings in the Northwoods and often referred to "the Rapids," happenings at "the Pelican" or "at Pelican Rapids." But it was not in reference to a village but a geographic location, like we refer to Hat Rapids or Bond Falls or Rainbow Flowage.

The 1878 map of Wisconsin shows "Pelican Station," referring to John Curran's stop-over at the site now occupied by Friendly Village.

In the 1880 census, located in the

Town of Jenny in Lincoln County, you can find John Curran, Martin Lynch, George Thompson, Samuel Sutton, W. J. Cleveland and a few others... all farmers, carpenters and laborers. But the only village listed is that of Jenny, now Merrill.

The *Stevens Point Journal* chronicled what was happening in this area often. March 25, 1882: "The Pelican Dam — The bill authorizing Edward D. Brown and others to maintain a dam, piers and boom in and across the Wisconsin River in Lincoln County,

passed the Assembly last Tuesday. If it fares as well in the Senate, and there seems to be no reason to believe that it will not, the property at Pelican, where the dam will be built, will no doubt be improved during the coming summer... There is every reason to believe that a smart town will soon spring up in the immediate vicinity of the dam and that at no distant day it will rank among one of the principal lumbering centers on the Wisconsin River..."

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History

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Sept. 9: "E. D., A. W., and W. E. Brown and T. W. Anderson have been at Pelican this week in company with the railroad officials, laying out the new town..."

Sept. 16: "The new town recently platted at Pelican Rapids by the Browns of this city and T. W. Anderson, has been named Rhinelander, after the President of the Milwaukee, Lake Shore & Western Railroad company, which company also has an interest in the town."

One last piece of evidence that no village existed at the site before the Browns and railroad officials platted the village of Rhinelander comes from a letter written by William Shaw in a 1923 issue of the *Wisconsin Magazine of History*. His comments included "... I was on the site of the coming city, and saw the whole region before there was any attempt to start a town [June 1882] As a college student, I went up with the late B. F. Dorr, an experienced tim-

ber cruiser, to look over 840 acres of woodland in township 36-9, lying south of the Pelican River, most of it within two miles of the present city of Rhinelander.

This land we entered at the land office at Wausau, paying the government price of \$1.25 an acre.

We had a dog tent and spent a week on the land. We met the railroad surveyors at their camp, which was located on about the highest ground within the present city of Rhinelander, near the confluence of the Pelican and Wisconsin rivers. When we crossed the Pelican, we found on the southerly bank the cabin of a French-Canadian "homesteader," who, it seemed, had lived there many years. Unfortunately he was not at home, and we failed to get from him much information about the locality which he could undoubtedly have furnished. His cabin was the only permanent structure of any kind that we saw in all that region of many square miles."