

# Our Times: Lake City in History

“Preserving Yesterday’s Memories for Tomorrow”

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## PRESIDENT’S CORNER

Our Lake City Historical Society and the local Heritage Preservation Commission have partnered in an exciting project to create a collection of Lake City Mayors. Their portraits are now hanging in the City Council Chambers. There are, however, a few pictures still missing to make the collection complete.

The internet has proven to be our friend, however. (In case you might not know, we have a website at [www.lakecityhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.lakecityhistoricalsociety.org).) Bill Brunstad of Chippewa Falls, WI found our website recently and read of the project. He not only had information about one of the missing mayors, L.S. (Leonard) Sherman, who was Lake City’s second mayor (1873-1874), he also had his picture!

There are still six pictures missing to make the collection complete. They are:

M.A. Baldwin (1880-1881), H. B. McKenney (1891-1892), W. C. Squire (1920-1928), Barney Timijan (1942-1946), E. T. Hartung (1946-1949) and Robert Smith (1966-68)

Maybe you have one of the pictures we need or know someone who might. Oh, and why not at your next convenience head to the second floor of City Hall and view the Mayor display and then head to the ballroom and check out the Society’s interesting historical displays.

LCHS meetings are the 4<sup>th</sup> Tuesday of each month at 2:00 p.m. in the upstairs conference room. We always welcome visitors.

Eloise Blattner

## 31-Minute DVD Features “Famous Names” in Lake City’s History

In a project made possible by a largely volunteer effort by Ben Threinen of Lake City, the Lake City Historical Society has undertaken the production of a video featuring “famous names” in the city’s history. A pilot version was unveiled at the recent Wabasha County Fair.

Threinen, head cameraman for KSTP in Minneapolis for 15 years before moving to Lake City with his wife Lola in 2009, is in the business of producing history documentaries. With \$1,000 in seed money from the LCHS to cover out-of-pocket costs, Threinen began assembling the photographic material, narrators and writers for a 31-minute DVD.

The pilot version covered the lives of water skiing inventor Ralph Samuelson, philanthropists George and Mary Patton, early pioneer Abner Dwelle, and historian Alice Grannis Murdoch.

Two more figures from local history will appear in the DVD under production, poet Nell Mabey and musician/farmer Oliver Francisco.

Threinen has enlisted LCHS members in the project, including, thus far, Constance Anderson, Bob Norberg, Marcia Savela, Lola Threinen and Denny Robertson as narrators, Don Schwartz as researcher, and Bob Norberg and Marcia Savela as writers.

Although further seed money is needed to complete the project, the LCHS hopes to have the completed video ready for sale before Christmas. If there are sufficient sales,

other “famous names” will be featured in a series of DVDs.

Here is information excerpted from the scripts completed thus far:

### ■ Ralph Samuelson ■

Who is the “father of water skiing”? No Lake City school child would be stumped for the answer. After all, they line the sidewalks one June day every year, settling in with their parents and thousands of visitors for a three-hour parade of marching bands, classic cars, marvelous steeds, and zippy, scooter-born Shriners. They assemble in tribute to the spotlight shown on the little town by favorite son Ralph Samuelson.

“Everyone thought I was nuts,” he acknowledged years later. He first experimented behind a power boat driven by his older brother. In the space of a few days, he would by trial and error invent the instruments to race, jump and zig-zag on water, eliciting from friends and skeptics gathered on shore the unanimous verdict, “You did it, Sammy.” The date was July 2, 1922, one day before his 19th birthday.

### ■ The Pattons ■

No name is so prominent and enduring in support of Lake City institutions as the Patton family. When George William Patton died in 1955 at the age of 78, he left nearly \$750,000 (in today’s dollars) to community institutions.

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## ■ Nell Mabey ■

George William's grandfather, also a George, brought the Patton name west from Ohio in 1855. After investigating the Wisconsin, Iowa and Minnesota Territories, he settled first in Winona, but soon judged Lake City's early stirrings and natural setting as more opportune. He had ready money. As a lad of 15, he had entered the mercantile business—an early version of the department store—and his managerial and money talents over 29 years left him with considerable affluence. Lake City life for the family began humbly enough—in a cold, rain-soaked shanty upon arriving by steamship on the proverbial "dark and stormy night." There was no boat landing, but the steamship captain granted the family a special accommodation to put their cow and household effects ashore.

## ■ Abner Dwelle ■

In a letter from "Lake Pepin, Minnesota," dated Oct. 30, 1854, pioneer Abner Dwelle wrote these words to his children back in Michigan after they had expressed some reluctance about joining their father on the frontier:

"If you expect to get any of the land I have got a claim on you must come this fall for the land will be surveyed this winter and all that is on their claims will hold the land. I have got four claims, one for myself and one for you and one for Merrill, and one for Henry, one hundred and sixty acres each.

"Now after I have paid out all my money and got you all as good a location as I have and broke into a new country, deprived myself of the comforts of life and then for you to think hard to break away from acquaintance, you are different from me. Relation nor acquaintance won't support you without you work for it."

## ■ Alice Murdoch ■

In the century and a half since the first pioneers arrived to start their lives anew in Lake City, making history, recording it and bringing it forward into the present have absorbed many good people.

In our own time the names of those who are messengers for the past are familiar to us from newspaper articles, history books and story-telling—Virginia Holst, Shirley Luettinger, Eloise Blattner, Katie Schmidt, Ethel Moyer, to name just a few. But to a person, they would acknowledge in admiration—and for inspiration—the late Alice Grannis Murdoch.

Alice Grannis was born here in 1894. Her grandparents on both sides had come to the area prior to Minnesota's becoming a state in 1858. Her grandfather Grannis was involved with a lumber mill and sorghum mill on Central Point property that in later years held The Shanty Bar, then the Nihart Resort and today the Willows Condos and Skyline Restaurant.

Nell Mabey was for 25 years a writer with the Minneapolis Tribune, retiring to Frontenac in the early 1930s. Although never married, she wrote an advice column for mothers and the lovelorn. "One does not need to be married," she once wrote, "to know about the hills and valleys of a love affair and coming from a family of 8 siblings, mothering was experienced daily."

In retirement, she began a second career as a poet and lived with her widowed sister Lulu at Bramble Haw, an estate built in 1925 with its entrance south of Frontenac on Highway 61. Much of her inspiration came from the natural surroundings and serenity of that location, which she shared with her Irish Water Spaniel, Whimpie. This is from her poem titled "Quiet time at Bramble Haw":

*The owl that called his folksy "Who?"  
Is silent now it's afternoon;  
The mourning dove is silent, too.  
Upon our doorstep shadows swoon  
And all about the grounds are strewn;  
The Whimpie sleeps upon his paw—  
It's quiet-time at Bramble Haw*

## ■ Oliver Francisco ■

Upwards of 50 diaries, each about 3 by 5 inches in size, repose as chronicles of our past in the archives of the Lake City Historical Society. Their author, Oliver P. Francisco, a fiddle-playing troubadour and Sugar Loaf Valley farmer, began writing in 1856 and made his last entry on January 16, 1926, the day before his death.

The tiny volumes transport the reader back to the time when plows drawn by oxen penetrated prairie sod for the first time, young Minnesota men volunteered to fight in the Civil War, and music-makers provided respite from the perils and hard labor of settler life.

At age 10, Francisco had already mastered the violin and he organized a local 4-piece orchestra soon after he arrived in Red Wing from New York state in 1856. He was 27. Music was a paying proposition—\$10 an evening for the orchestra, 35 cents for a lesson, as Francisco would record in his diary.

Thumbing through these diaries we learn of many of the writer's first-time experiences: breaking sod in 1860, a low temperature of 34 below in 1861, still lower -- 56 degrees below—in 1888. He came upon a phonograph for the first time in 1912, took his first airplane ride in 1920, heard his first radio broadcast in 1924. At 96, pronounced fit to travel by his physician, Mr. Francisco and two of his daughters made a trip to St. Paul and a radio station where his fiddle playing reached the largest audience of his long career.

# It Takes a Family of Societies To Preserve Local History

It takes collaboration to preserve local history. While it is natural to form a lifelong allegiance with the area closest to us—birthplace, early school, farmstead, city or town—it is important to work with other preservationists to make sure critical pieces of our joint history are not lost.

Thanks to the Internet, we can access the websites of other local history groups, note their activities, and participate when common interests arise. Our recently developed website ([www.lakecityhistoricalsociety.org](http://www.lakecityhistoricalsociety.org)) has generated inquiries, new members and artifact donations. Below we give details on kindred spirits. Support the LCHS first, of course, but donating to the efforts of other local history groups sends a message that we are all in this together.

■ The Mazeppa Area Historical Society ([www.mazeppahistoricalociety.org](http://www.mazeppahistoricalociety.org)) was established in 2010 and has 121 members. Its officers are Helen Reiland, president; Jim Siems, vice president; and Diane Gilsdorf, treasurer.

■ The Wabasha County Historical Society ([www.wabashacountyhistory.org](http://www.wabashacountyhistory.org)) operates a museum in Reads Landing that is housed in the oldest surviving brick schoolhouse in Minnesota. It has 120 members. Officers are Helen Myers, president; David Danckwart, vice president; and Jean Benson, secretary-treasurer. The organization is currently engaged in fundraising to implement a major renovation of the 140-year-old building.

On Sept. 16, the group sponsored a program titled "Disappearing Country Schools of Wabasha County." Participants brought photos, artifacts and memories to share with each other.

■ The Goodhue County Historical Society ([www.goodhuehistory.mus.mn.us](http://www.goodhuehistory.mus.mn.us)) was chartered in 1869 and is Minnesota's oldest county historical society. After residing for 37 years in the basement of the County Courthouse, the Society moved into the Baptist Old People's Home building on College Hill in Red Wing in September of 1969 (1166 Oak Street). Officers are Roseanne Grosso, chair; Roger Hand, treasurer; Ruth Nerhaugen, vice chair; and Fran O'Connell, secretary.

■ The Plainview Area History Center, an affiliate of the Rural America Arts Partnership, is located at 412 West Broadway. Its purpose is to tell the stories and preserve the history of people and events in the Plainview area.

The building housing the Center was constructed in 1866 by the Methodist Society and was purchased by the Center from the Methodist Church in 1998. In 2008, the Center purchased the J. R. Watkins residence and it has been renovated to show the humble beginnings of the Watkins enterprise and the family's 17-year stay in Plainview. Both sites are open from 1 - 4 p.m. on Saturdays.--Bob Norberg, Vice President.

## The Plainview Origins of the World-Wide Watkins Enterprise

Joseph Ray Watkins founded Watkins Incorporated in 1868 from the kitchen of his home in Plainview, Minnesota. Its initial product, "Original Liniment," offered relief for tired, aching muscles. The ingredients were camphor, extracted from evergreen trees, and capicum from red peppers. J.R. Watkins was so confident of his home-manufactured natural product that he introduced the now famous money-back guarantee.

By 1885 the production of liniment had outgrown his home and Plainview's limited access to wider markets. He moved the company to the booming lumber town of Winona with its five railroads and Mississippi River port. Early in the new century, the company expanded its product line to include an array of natural consumables for everyday living, including medicinal salves, vegetable oil soap, rose perfume, and many natural spices and extracts.

Although established initially for rural consumers, by the 1920's demand was clearly growing beyond farming communities and Watkins' began marketing in urban centers. By the 1930s the J.R. Watkins Medical Company was a thriving international corporation with facilities and distribution in Canada, Australia, and other countries of the world.

Since its beginnings, Watkins has been family owned and operated. J. R. Watkins' descendants—Watkins and Kings—guided the company through its first 110 years. In 1978 Irwin L. Jacobs purchased Watkins.--Drawn from the Watkins website, [www.jrwatkins.com](http://www.jrwatkins.com).



J. R. Watkins

## Visitor's Query Brings Forth Water Skiing Postcards

During the most recent Water Ski Days, a young man from Wisconsin stopped by the Lake City Historical Society booth and asked to see postcards. "I was driving through Lake City several months ago, and I saw the sign, **BIRTHPLACE OF WATER SKIING**," he explained. "I hadn't known that so I had to come back for a visit."

After thumbing through several of our postcards, he expressed disappointment. "I've looked all over town for a postcard that identifies Lake City as the birthplace of water skiing—a really professional card on stiff stock and a glossy finish. There isn't one."

At a subsequent meeting of the LCHS, it was decided to explore the printing of postcards to fill the vacuum. Two images were selected, the familiar mural that hangs on the wall of the Lake City Post Office, and a posed picture from the 1960s of Ralph Samuelson, the Lake City native who invented water skiing, and Ben Simons, who served the city for a number of years as Harbormaster. A large blow-up of the photo (right) is on display at the Lake City Marina.



## The Story Behind the Post Office Mural

*[Editor's Note: When the LCHS decided to use a photo of the Post Office mural on a postcard, we were surprised that few people, even those who had lived here 50 years or more, knew who had painted it or how it came to be painted. When we inquired at the Post Office, the answer came quickly: rural mail carrier John Scott was the man behind the brush. Here is the story in his own words.]*

**By John Scott**

The story of the "Birthplace of Waterskiing" mural actually begins before its inception. Former Postmaster Steven Hinkley began nurturing the idea before ever coming to Lake City.

Steve began his postal career in St. Paul as a city carrier after serving a tour in the Navy. He got into management evaluating city routes in the old St. Paul Division. He visited many post offices, many of them historic buildings like ours in Lake City. When the Minneapolis and St. Paul Divisions merged, he had the choice to remain in his present position with twice the work or take the vacant Lake City Postmaster position. He chose wisely.

Steve formally became the Postmaster here in

1992 and brought with him the seeds that would eventually result in our mural. A few years later he was going through old stuff in the basement with our then Custodian Howard Horen and found the photo that would become the pattern for the mural. He thought it unique and hung it on the wall by his office door. He knew he wanted to do something special for Lake City, waterskiing and our Post Office.

Steve consulted with his superiors about a wall painting celebrating the birth of waterskiing. In his former position he had seen many offices with paintings and murals and he knew that was what he wanted to do in Lake City. He got permission from his bosses to go ahead as long as it didn't cost too much and was not painted directly on the wall. Then came the announcement to the employees of his vision and the interviews with artists interested in doing the project.

That's when I went into Steve's office and said that I wanted to do the mural. It took Steve a back for a moment before he said, "How do you plan to do it?" I told Steve that it would take nine panels to cover the 10 by 10 foot wall above his office, each about three feet by three feet. One large canvas would wrinkle and move with temperature changes. The panels would be hung on a lattice framework screwed to the wall. Special clips on the corners of each panel would hook into

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would hook into clips on the framework. He looked at me and said, "Okay, have it done by Water Ski Days at the end of June."

I had grown up loving to draw and graduated from Concordia College (now University) with degrees in Education, Social Studies and Art. Teaching gave me many chances to use what I had learned. I switched to the Postal Service in 1980 as a Rural Carrier sub in Welch, where I spent five years before coming to Lake City in 1985.

It took three months before the actual painting started. I asked one of my three sons, Timothy, if he could make the panel frames in his woodshop class at Red Wing High School. I stretched the canvas, attached the clips and fitted them to the lattice framework in the vaulted living room of our house. The picture of Ralph Samuelson was traced, with some artistic license to fit a rectangular scene onto a square mural, using a transparency and projector. The silhouetted people on the beach were meant to be ambiguous so as not to take away from the focal point of the plane and skier.

I spent many days in Ohuta Park just watching the water, trying to get a "feel" for it before trying to paint it. Lake Pepin is a living entity, constantly moving and changing. Painting it took over 80 hours spanning two months. A Rural Carrier Convention in Fairmont at the end of June put a sense of urgency into finishing it. While at the convention, I had my other two sons, Jacob and Steven, paint the beach and people I had outlined. When I returned, I touched them up.

The unveiling at the Post Office was planned for Friday, June 28, 1996, to kick off Water Ski Days. Steve had invited Hazel, Ralph Samuelson's widow and Grand Marshall of that year's parade, along with several television stations from Rochester and the cities, other postmasters, and our District manager. Steve was getting very nervous and I had many messages on my answering machine while at the convention. On Thursday, I showed two panels to Steve just to calm his nerves.

The night before the unveiling Steve, Howard Horen, and I set up a scaffold, put up the framework and hung the canvases. This was the first time Steve had seen the completed work. I thought he was going to cry. That look and the look on Hazel's face at the unveiling was all the payment I would need. ■

## The Lake City Historical Society

The present day Lake City Historical Society was established in 1986 to collect, preserve, and disseminate knowledge about the history of Lake City and relate it to the history of Wabasha and Goodhue counties and the state of Minnesota. Membership is open to the general public.

### Archive and Displays

The Society welcomes contributions of photographs, artifacts and other items relating to the history of Lake City. Some of the Society's holdings are on display in cabinets located in the second floor Ballroom of the City Hall. telephone 651-345-2692.



The color mural on display at the Lake City Post Office celebrates the invention of water skiing by Lake City native Ralph Samuelson. The artist, Lake City rural mail carrier John Scott, based the mural on a black and white photo that former Postmaster Steven Hinkley discovered in the Post Office basement.

## LCHS Membership (Sept., 2012)

\* Designates Life Member

The Lake City Historical Society appreciates the support and encouragement of the members listed below. The annual dues support a number of projects and programs that preserve local history for the education and enjoyment of present and future generations. See membership application form at right.

Alice Atkinson	Susan Leuer
John Albright	Susan Links
Georgene Arndt	Shirley Luettinger
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Donis Boss & Jeff Kuznia	Monica Michenfelder
Virginia Bowers	*Mary Ellen Miller
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*Judy Burfeind	Tim & Lisa Myers
Dave Close	*Dolores Nelson
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Marianne Kaufmann	Patricia Wirtanen
Roger Knutson	Kathy & Gary Yotter
*Onalee Kramer	Ethel Zimmerman
Randy Larson	

### The Lake City Historical Society

#### Officers, 2011-2012

Eloise Blattner, President  
Bob Norberg, Vice President  
Don Schwartz, Secretary  
Georgene Arndt, Treasurer  
Constance Anderson, Board Member  
Marianne Kaufmann, Board Member  
Lucy Sontag, Board Member

### Yes, I Would Like to Join the LCHS

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ ST \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Email \_\_\_\_\_

#### Annual Membership:

**\$10 Per Individual, or  
\$25 Per Family**

**I also want to support the Society's Annual Fund. My contribution of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ will be added to annual membership(s).**

**I have included in my payment gift memberships for the following persons at the individual rate:**

#### Gift Membership For:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ ST \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

#### Gift Membership For:

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_ ST \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

**My check for a total of \$ \_\_\_\_\_ is enclosed and made payable to the Lake City Historical Society.**

**Mail to: Lake City Historical Society  
POB 246  
Lake City, MN 55041**

*The LCHS is a non-profit organization and contributions are deductible for tax purposes.*