

Park made to honor those who first came to Willard

by Dean Lesar

Fairchild and Northeast Railroad trains once rumbled past its edges. Model T Fords carrying families of local settlers to church putted past. First horse teams, then crude tractors, hauled crops nearby. Every parent and every child of every family that's ever called Willard home has surely seen it, and not thought twice.

That has changed now for a formerly nondescript 4-acre parcel of land at the corner of County Trunk G and Dove Road in Willard. The land is now known as Settlers' Park, a work in progress for much of the

last decade as town leaders have prepared for the community's 2007 Centennial. From a 16'x32' replica of a Slovenian hay-drying shed to the 190 bricks bearing settlers' names, the park has been fashioned to honor those who first claimed the land around Willard as their own.

Settler's Park is all Willard, "heart and soul," says Scott "Blacky" Herrick, the town of Hendren chairman from 1997-2003

and one of the Willard residents who first began to talk of Centennial plans in the late 1990s. As early as 1997, Herrick said, the town Board was beginning to discuss just how it would recognize Willard's first 100 years.

The town was initially interested in buying a 2-acre piece of corner land from Frances C. Zevnik, a former resident now in North Carolina. Mr. Zevnik responded that he would be willing to give the land to the community, as long as it would be developed for a park to honor pioneers of the farmland in the area. In

2000, by a resident vote of 29-19, according to town of Hendren meeting minutes, the land donation was accepted.

Ken Kim, a town Board member at the time, then contacted Walter and Clara Hribar of Greenwood about the possibility of obtaining two more acres of contiguous land to square off the Zevnik parcel. Clara Hribar was a daughter of Willard settlers John and Anna Routar, and

"We have just unbelievable hours and hours of work (from volunteers). The list is endless. It included really a big spectrum of people."

-- Carol Vedra



The main sign for Settlers' Park in Willard is carved into a white oak log from the Clark County forest. The kozolec (background, right) is an example of a Slovenian hay-drying shed.

she and her husband agreed to donate two more acres for the park.

In 1999, according to then town clerk Carol Vedra, the topics of community beautification and historic renovation began making the rounds of Willard. That talk

turned into such projects as razing of dilapidated buildings and restoration of the former land office building in the village. As Vedra said, those original discussions and actions were the precursor to development of the park to honor settlers.

With the four acres of land in town ownership, work began at the site. A large low area was filled in with material from township ditch-clearing work. A road was stubbed into the site.

A steering committee of town residents began to look at park plans more seriously in 2000. The national Park Service sent a representative to Willard to talk to the committee about ideas for developing a park. A college student at UW-Milwaukee drafted a rough map of the park that year.

The first thought was to build a modern shelter in the park, but when local wood craftsman Bill Snedic became involved, the whole flavor of the park changed. He suggested construction of Slovenian-theme structures that would better honor the folks that settled Willard.

As with any development project, money was needed. Kim introduced the idea of a historical society to act as the fund-raising entity for the park, as well as the Centennial celebration that would follow.

"We had to raise money and the town couldn't raise money," Kim said. "So I said, 'Let's form a historical society.'"

The Willard Historical Society was approved by the state of Wisconsin in 2001. It held its first annual meeting on Feb. 6 of that year. One of its first goals was to

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On the cover: Quast and Company Store (1927): left to right, Hugo Quast, Ignac Cesnik, and Mayme Bayuk. Photo courtesy of Spominska Zgodovina Historical Memories, Willard, Wis.

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In HONOR of my father, Frank Perovsek, and the other Willard settlers.

"My dad came here in 1908. My maiden name is Perovsek. I've lived here (on the home farm) every day of my life, except for three days in 1929 when I went by train to Chicago, Ill., with my dad, for my sister's wedding. I am 92."

-- Josephine (Perovsek) Trunkel

Pictured here is Frank Perovsek and Josephine cultivating beans and potatoes. Corn is in the background.

