

# St. Michael Historian



*Official Newsletter of the St. Michael Historical Society, St. Michael, Minnesota*

**November 2012, Fall**

**Volume 6, Issue 4**

## **The Mystery of the Coconut**

*By Bob Zahler*

Normally, I don't write in the first person as typically the history I write is not something I personally experienced, but this is a story in which I did play a small part. The mystery of the coconut, however, started long before I knew of its existence, but I relay to you now the parts of the story that I learned from others.



*Photo Courtesy Tom Diem*

In 1971 newly hired science teacher Roger Ketel found a coconut in the science storage room at St. Michael-Albertville High School. He had no idea why it was there or from where it came, but he figured that it must be there for a reason and decided to let it remain. For the next 40 years that coconut remained in the high school science department and was used by teachers for occasional presentations, but mostly it just sat there in the storage cabinets. As new science teachers came to the department they often asked "What's the deal with the coconut?" To which the reply came "Well, we don't know, but it's always been here and it comes in handy once in awhile, so we keep it."

It was 2002 when I got brought into the mystery. I was attending a high school basketball game at Rockford High School where I was teaching at the time. Also at the game was STMA science teacher Dan Abrahamson, who was one of my science teachers in high school and whose kids were now students of mine at Rockford. Dan and I were sitting next to each other at the game when Dan brings up the topic of this coconut. Knowing that I was a history teacher he tells me about this odd coconut which he thinks may have been around since WWII. When I asked him why he thought

this, he said “because it has a name and address on it”. “What’s the name?” I asked. On the coconut was written “Mrs. Joseph Diem, Delano, Minnesota”. At that I suddenly became curious as I had heard about WWII soldiers mailing things like coconuts home from the South Pacific. The Diem name was also familiar to me as I remembered my dad talking about somebody from St. Michael by that name, but the Delano address didn’t make sense to me. Not knowing anybody by the name of Diem in St. Michael any longer and being buried in my teaching career at the time, I put the mystery of the coconut behind me and didn’t think about it again for ten years.



*Pfc Joe Diem in the fall of 1944 about two months before being killed by a sniper on the island of Morotai.*

*Photo courtesy of Tom Diem*

Jump ahead to 2012. In February I received a call from a Dr. Tom Diem who had just retired from a successful practice in Fridley as a plastic surgeon. He was told by his former St. Michael grade school classmate, John Jaeb, that I would be interested in seeing some old photos that he had. It was while talking to Dr. Diem on the phone that the mysterious coconut popped back into my mind. Without mentioning the coconut to Dr. Tom, I inquired about his family story. This is when the mystery started to unravel. Much of the rest of this story comes from Dr. Tom.

In 1938 Dr. Tom Diem’s father, Joseph Diem of Delano, was doing some part-time work for the nuns of St. Peter’s Parish in Delano. Here he met Olivia Barthel of St. Michael who was also working for the nuns. Both were already in their late 20s and unmarried. The nuns thought that they were a good pair and encouraged them to date, which they did. They were married in St. Michael in June 1941 and made their home in Delano where Joe worked at the granite works along with doing masonry. When World War II broke out later that year, Joe Diem was drafted by the army; but the draft notice arrived when Olivia was pregnant with their first child. He received a deferment until after the child was born in November of 1942. Joe saw the birth of his son, Tommy, and then was inducted into the armed forces in February 1943. After training in Arkansas, Mississippi and Massachusetts, Joe Diem was sent to

New Guinea in the South Pacific in the spring of 1944 after which he took part in the invasion of Morotai in the Netherlands East Indies in September. Taking Morotai from the Japanese and establishing an airfield there was an important step in liberating the Philippines. It is likely that while in Morotai that Pfc. Joe Diem, like many soldiers who experienced the tropics for the first and likely only time in their lives, mailed the coconut home to his wife. US forces quickly took control of the island, but the Japanese continued to send reinforcements to Morotai through November 1944 as they also understood the island’s importance. It was during one of the mopping up missions when Pfc. Diem was killed by a sniper near the Pilowo River on January 27, 1945.

According to letters written by Pfc. Diem’s chaplain and the company commander, Joe was not only a model soldier, but extremely well liked. He acted as the company barber and helped build a chapel on the island. He had been a member of the church choir in Delano and was admired by many for his musical talents. Joe Diem was originally buried on Morotai, but his body was later brought back to Delano.

Soon after World War II Olivia (commonly known as Ollie) and her young son, Tommy, took up residence in the upstairs apartment of the “Ullmann House”, which was the red brick edifice that once stood on Main Street at what is now the intersection of Main Street and St. Michael Parkway. Ollie (Barthel) Diem remarried in June of 1960 to Michael Chervenak, the father of Jim Chervenak, the town dentist. Afterwards, they moved to

Pennsylvania. Ollie moved back to St. Michael in the mid 1970s and she spent most of her remaining years there. Ollie Chervenak passed away in 2008.

While “little Tommy”, Dr. Tom Diem, also moved back to Minnesota, he and I never had an opportunity to meet. His mother was simply known as Ollie Chervenak to me, which is why I didn’t connect the name on the coconut to her right away. How the coconut ended up in the high school science labs is still not exactly clear. It is likely that back in the 1950s Ollie loaned the coconut to the Catholic High School to be used in a display and it just never got returned. When the Catholic high school closed in 1968, the building and most of the furnishings were sold to the public school district and the coconut was moved to the new high school (now St. Michael Elementary) as part of the science equipment. In 1992 it was moved to the “new” high school, which is now Middle School West. Last February, when I was reminded of the mysterious coconut, I approached my former teacher and now colleague, Dan Abrahamson, to see if he knew the whereabouts of the coconut. With yet one more move to a new high school in 2009, the coconut could have been tossed or misplaced. The Science Department, however, had not only kept it, but moved it as though it was an important part of the science lab. I relayed the story I had pieced together to Mr. Abrahamson and he agreed that the coconut should go back to its rightful owner.

When Dr. Tom Diem and I got together to look at photos, I presented the coconut to him. He was very surprised and touched to receive it. He had few mementos from his dad and said that it would go on the mantel next to his dad’s Purple Heart. He said that he knew that his uncle had received a coconut like this from his dad and had often wondered why his mother never had. The coconut had not only survived a journey across the ocean, but surprisingly survived numerous moves around town, not to mention being handled by thousands of school kids. A coconut is small recompense for losing one’s father, but since Joe Diem left little behind, it provides one small connection to the father that Dr. Tom Diem never got a chance to know.

## SMHS Hosts 2nd Annual Antique Appraisal

On Monday, October 22, the St. Michael Historical Society hosted its second annual Antique Appraisal night at the St. Michael City Hall. Close to fifty people showed up bringing items to be appraised by experts in the Appraisal field. Below are just a few of those items brought in to be appraised.



*Left photo:*

*Owner called it a honey pot and used it for home décor, it was discovered to be a circa 1880 tobacco pot, worth 125 dollars*



*Center photo:*

*Attendee reading his old historic newspaper while waiting for an appraisal*

*Right photo:*

*Having her cast iron items appraised*



*All photos courtesy of Crystal Sayen*

**St. Michael****Historical Society****11800 Town Center Drive****St. Michael, MN 55376***Phone: 763-416-7967**We're on the Web!**See us at:**www.stmhistsoc.org*

Meetings held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

This newsletter is published quarterly for the benefit of the members of the Saint Michael Historical Society. Reprints of this or any other newsletter by the Society are not permitted without the express written consent of the Saint Michael Historical Society.

Publisher:

Sheldon Barthel

Editors:

Bob Zahler

Stephen Barthel

## Daze and Knights Parade

The historical society once again participated in the annual Daze and Knights parade. This year society board member Harvey Zahler drove a 1948 Farmall "C" tractor in the parade. The society wishes to thank Earl Bauman for the use of his tractor and Clarence Eull for the use of his vintage corn binder that was pulled behind. By the way, the tractor was purchased new by Earl's dad from Welter's Implement in St. Michael.



*Photo Courtesy of Betty Zahler*

## Renew your Membership now for 2013

This year we are including with this newsletter a revised edition of our Membership Application form, now entitled "MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION/RENEWAL FORM". We ask that when you submit your dues for next year, you fill out the information requested and submit this form to us along with your annual dues. This will enable us to do a better

job of serving you and help us keep our records current. If your RENEWAL FORM is marked "paid through 2013", you need only submit it if you prefer to have your newsletter sent to you online.

Beginning in February of next year, for those submitting Email addresses, we will Email a digital or online copy instead of a hard copy directly to you. If you wish to continue receiving a hard copy as you are now, simply leave the Email question blank. Some of the advantages of receiving the newsletter by Email are: 1) All photos in the newsletter will be in full color instead of black and white. 2) You will still be able to print your own copy from the electronic newsletter. 3) You will help save trees. 4) You will help your historical society save money and time on mailing and printing costs.

Please take the time now to renew your membership! Send your annual dues to the address listed on the RENEWAL FORM or to:

Sheldon Barthel

401 Butternut Lane, SE

St. Michael, MN 55376

If you have any questions concerning your membership, please feel free to call Sheldon at: 763-497-4205