

St. Michael Historian



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Settler's Log Home Resurfaces Before Disappearing

by Bob Zahler

Historians spend much of their time looking for evidence of the past so that they can interpret and write about that evidence. Sometimes, however, the most exciting finds are the ones the historian stumbles upon. Such is the case with the log home of Anton Schnitzler. Until recently, Anton Schnitzler's known imprint in the St. Michael community was limited to a notation by Daniel Ross Farnham in his 1880 history of Wright County that the first marriage witnessed in the log chapel of St. Michael was that of Anton Schnitzler to Catherine Knoebel in September of 1856. Since the Schnitzler name disappeared from the local record, little else was known about Anton, Catherine and their time in St. Michael.

Jump ahead 160 years. In November 2016 Chad Kasper began tearing down the house that had been in the Kasper family for the last 75 years. Situated on the west side of County Road 35 (Buffalo Road), just a quarter mile southwest of St. Michael Elementary, this house was a part of St. Michael's rural landscape. To passersby there was nothing particularly noteworthy about this house. It had been re-sided numerous times over the years, and the 1990s vinyl was the first layer to be removed. Chad had been told by his father, Dennis Kasper, that the center section of the old house was made of logs; so they proceeded with the demolition carefully, peeling away the layers to finally reveal the core of the old Kasper home: an original settler's log house. Then, after taking photos, even the logs were disassembled until the structure was completely down. It was at this point, when all that remained was a pile of logs, that this historian became aware of what they had uncovered. Naturally, more research needed to be done. Who had built this log home, and how did it end up in the Kasper family? Here's what the evidence seems to tell us:

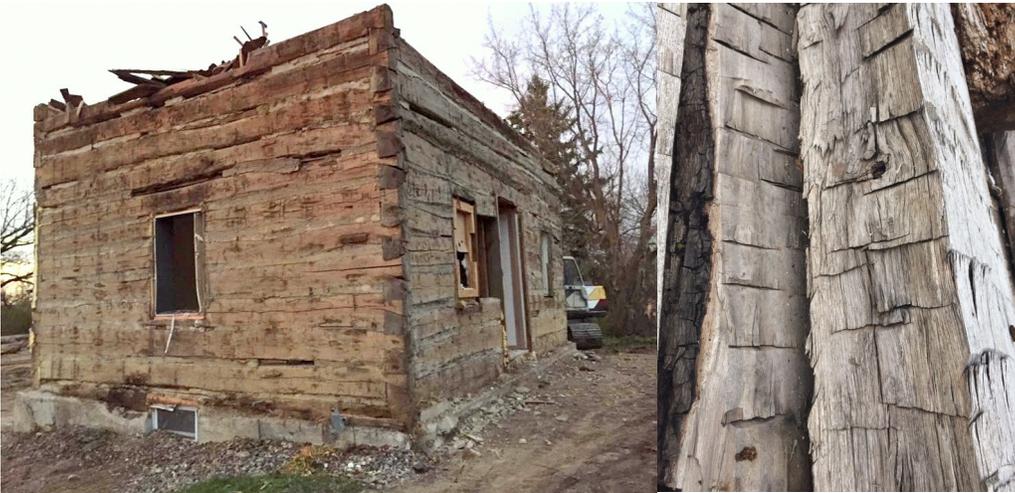


The Kasper family home as it appeared sometime in the early 1990s. Most people were unaware of the home's historic beginnings as additions and modern siding disguised Anton Schnitzler's 1856-built log house.

The title abstract of the property shows that in 1860 the U.S. government granted title to the 160 acres that the house originally sat on to Anton Schnitzler. In order to get title, however, Anton had to meet the requirements of the Pre-emption Law of 1841 whereby he had to clear the trees from between two and four acres of land, build a dwelling, and have someone vouch that he was a bona fide settler and not just a land speculator. These improvements were typically completed 3-4 years before being granted title. Since Farnham says that Anton and Catherine got married in September of 1856, the timing is about right. It is likely that Anton arrived in the spring or summer of 1856, which was when the first flood of settlers arrived in this part of Minnesota. He likely selected this parcel of land while at the land office in Minneapolis, walked out to find his claim, and then proceeded to build the required cabin. Having the cabin completed and some land cleared allowed Anton, under the law, to make an exclusive bid on the property and thus gain the title. Anton's cabin was very similar in size and construction to other log cabins that have been discovered and dismantled in the last 25 years in the St. Michael area. Like other German settlers he used the Schwalbenschwansen, or swallowtail, notching technique that forces moisture to run to the outside. It also made for a very tight joint.

The abstract also shows that on August 10, 1857 Anton and Catherine took out a mortgage on their land with a gentleman named Martin Selkregg of St. Anthony to secure \$300. The money may have been needed for tools, oxen, or seed; but at least on that date yet, their land was well worth the \$300 they received for putting up the land as security. However, on the very next day, August 11, 1857; the security on that loan began to unravel. The largest grain and flour company in New York failed, arousing suspicion in the entire market. Then, on August 24, the Ohio Life Insurance and Trust Company announced that it had stopped making payments, triggering a chain reaction among banks across the country. While there wasn't a wholesale collapse of banks, the crisis exposed vulnerability in the market prompting people to panic and sell off assets. The result in Minnesota was a collapse in land values which led to a general recession for the next several years.

Whether there were other circumstances that affected Anton and Catherine's financial situation is not known. What is known is that by October of 1860 they owed Mr. Selkregg the principal plus interest totaling \$453.50. In December Mr. Selkregg received title to the land in a Sheriff's sale. Where Anton and Catherine lived for the next five years is uncertain. Records show that in January of 1865 Anton was drafted into the Civil War and served with the First Minnesota Voluntary Infantry Regiment. Catherine shows up in the 1865 census living in the household of Christopher and Henrietta Schendel, but still in Frankfort Township. After the war the couple ended up in Wabasha, Minnesota never returning to live in St. Michael.



Left: on November 10, 2016 Anton Schnitzler's cut logs saw the light of day for the first time in 160 years . His German craftsmanship is especially apparent in the joints. Right: a close-up of one of the logs reveals the cuts made by Anton's adz, the tool used to hew the logs flat so that they would stack on top of one another more tightly.

next 49 years. It is likely that the Duerr's added the log kitchen to the rear of the house and a frame porch to the front. In 1916 Peter Duerr, now a widower and retired, deeded the land to his son Lorenz. Lorenz Duerr held the title for the next 20 years, but in the 1930s he ran into financial difficulties, like many during the Great Depression, and he was forced to sell the land to pay off debts.

In 1941, after creditors had settled claims to the property, Albin and Saloma (Kolles) Kasper purchased the land and the log home, which by this time had been covered with at least two layers of siding thus disguising the logs. The basic structure of the home, however, did not change. There was one bedroom downstairs and two upstairs. The upstairs rooms, reached through a narrow and steep stairway, was not insulated other than the thickness of the logs and a coating of plaster. In this home the Kaspers raised nine children. Albin passed away in 1966 and Saloma in 1982. For a few years in the 80s the house was rented out. Then, it became the home of Cheri (Kasper) Nelson, and then of her brother Chad Kasper, both grandchildren of Albin and Saloma. Cheri and Chad made cosmetic updates to the home to make it more comfortable, but major improvements were cost prohibitive. In 2016 Chad made the decision to build a new home on his property adjacent to a development, but this also meant that the old home would have to come down since city ordinances don't allow two homes on the same parcel. After standing for 160 years, the log home built by Anton Schnitzler completed its service.

As for the log house, in 1863 Mr. Selkregg sold the house and land for \$500 to Jacob Vollbrecht of Hanover who sold it the next year to his brother William. These were probably investment purchases since by this time the market was starting to improve and many believed that land values would rebound. The Vollbrechts had homes in Hanover, so it is not likely that there was anyone living in the log home until it was sold to Peter Duerr. Peter, who had come with his parents and siblings to St. Michael in 1861, purchased the Schnitzler home in 1867. Peter and his wife Maria (Frey) made the log house their home for the

Sharing: What Goes Around - Comes Around! *by Stephen Samuel Barthel*

Recently, I visited St. John's University and established contact with Archives Associate Liz Knuth concerning two 1889 letters written by my then eighteen-year-old grandfather (Hubert Gregory Barthel) to his parents while he was attending St. John's. Along with those letters I had a photo taken by Peter Engel on June 13, 1889 of a large group of students and monks in front of the doors of the Great Hall at St. Johns University in Collegeville, Minnesota. An "X" was marked on the photo to indicate where my grandfather, Hubert, was standing.

I was puzzled by Hubert's being at St. John's University. Why was he there? How could his parents afford this? To my knowledge, he never graduated from high school. Was it common practice for children of immigrants to get some training at St. John's? Was he attending a religious retreat? Did others, who were from St. Michael, also attend?

Liz Knuth responded by saying "I was pleasantly surprised about what we could find on your grandfather's time at St. John's. We have his grades, a record of his student account, a detailed list of supplies he bought from the school, and two slightly different registers. He is also mentioned once in the catalog, and several times in the school newspaper *The Record*."

"Hubert Barthel was a student at St. John's for a little over one semester in spring 1889. He was taking a mix of preparatory and first-year high school classes. 'Preparatory' classes at the time were for young men who weren't academically prepared for high school level classes." Hubert Barthel's transcript shows he took preparatory and first-year classes. The two grades represent two examination periods. I suspect that German-English is a class about translation; students could also take English-German.

In Hubert's student account he paid tuition, room and board for six months in early January. The other debit is for what he spent in the Stationery Department (bookstore). The "Stationery Dept" gives a record of Hubert's purchases from the college bookstore. Hubert's name was also mentioned in the student newspaper *The Record* almost monthly while he was there, for good conduct and academic progress. Twice his grade average is included.

Note: Elizabeth T. Knuth is an Archives Associate, College of St. Benedict/St. John's University. <http://www.csbsju.edu/sju-archives>

After scanning the two 1889 letters, which will go to the St. Michael Historical Society and St. John's University, the actual letters will be kept by St. John's University.

Often, when one is involved in historical and genealogical research, and people find that out, you become like a magnet. Information flows to you. On Hubert Gregory Barthel I possess an 1870s photo of him as a child with his pigs (with a log building in the background) near Pelican Lake. I also have the marriage certificate (including several marriage-related documents), a marriage photo, and funeral book. After scanning the funeral book, I donated the original to the St. Michael Historical Society, so that it is available to Hubert's descendants to view.

164		Hubert Barthel	
1889			
Jan 3	Slate, pens, foolscap, Arithm., 3 Readers.	1	90
	Speller, 3 Lesebuch, Catechism		80
9	Spool, Grammer, Ger & Eng. ^{reading} books, book ^{copy} of book ^{copy} of the Catholic catechism.	2	13

Hubert Barthel's account at the St. John's Stationery Store shows his purchases from January 3, 1889 which included a slate (for classwork), pens (probably ink dip pens), foolscap (standard writing paper), Arithmetic (book), 3 Readers, a Speller (spelling book), 3 Lesebuch (German reading books), and a copy of the Catholic catechism.

There is a lesson to be learned about giving and receiving. My grandmother's second cousin in 1934 visited relatives in Fond du Lac County, Wisconsin. He had photos taken from tin types of my 2nd great grandfather back to my 3rd great grandfather, Peter Miesen, who was born in the 1790s. The cousin also photographed an 1847 Schreibbuch (Diary), written by his son, which gave an account of leaving their home in Germany, the path and transportation method they took to get to Antwerp, Belgium, the storm they ran into on the Atlantic, arrival in New York, the trip on the Erie Canal, their arrival in Wisconsin. My grandmother's second cousin promised the relatives in 1934 that he would share all of this information

with anyone who desires it. Because of that promise I have kept the tradition of sharing what I find. As with the St. John’s exchange, I gave and immensely received. Historical items often get discarded over time, and not everyone will have access to it if kept by one person, but scanning and then donating it to a historical society ensures that others may benefit. Identify people in photos and do what you can to preserve the past for the future. Even though this article may not be about your ancestor, there is a lesson to be learned from this.

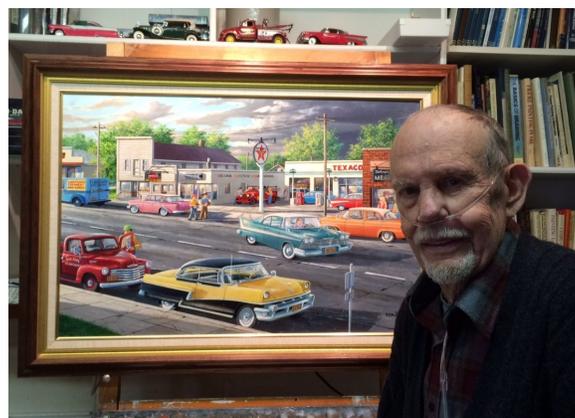
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www.saintmichaelhistory.org
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 Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.
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In Memoriam: Ken Zylla

By Bob Zahler

In February we learned of the passing of artist Ken Zylla. Ken was not only a great artist, he was also a gentleman and a generous human being. We were fortunate to have been able to commission Ken to paint “St. Michael USA” depicting a scene of St. Michael as it appeared about 1960. When we approached him in late 2013, he was already having some health issues, but painting was his passion. He also loved history and he used his gift of painting to recreate memories of the past. I personally appreciated my meetings with Ken as we discussed how to recreate this scene that was patched together from many old photographs of St. Michael. Ken loved to share stories of his own upbringing in central Minnesota, and he understood that getting the details right in our painting would be important to those who remembered St. Michael “way back when.” His basement studio was lined with books that he referenced to make sure that his cars had the correct hood ornament or tail light for that year and model. He would say that if he got those wrong, he would hear about it from car enthusiasts. While Ken received compensation for the painting he did for us, he was also very generous in sharing advice on how we could make the most of selling his print. Ken wanted us to be successful too.

Ken passed away on February 17, 2017 at the age of 82. Minnesota lost one of its most famous and prolific artists, and we lost a friend. Thanks for the memories Ken!



Upcoming Events

June 12, Monday

No meeting in July

August 14, Monday

Board of Directors meeting, 7:00 PM in the Library Conference Room

Happy Fourth!

Board of Directors meeting, 7:00 PM in the Library Conference Room.