



The AKEY BRAKEY News

a bi-annual newsletter from the Richland County Historical Society

April, 2017 Volume #9 – Issue # 1 – promoting and supporting the History of Richland County and Southwestern Wisconsin

LIGHTS ON! A.V. MILLER, THE REA, AND LIGHTING RICHLAND COUNTY’S FARMS

By Dr. Jerry Bower

This article completes the story of how electricity was generated to light up Richland Center and Richland County. In it, we meet A.V. Miller, the third key man in bringing power to our city and county. Previously we learned about George Strang, who provided electricity to Richland Center, and Fred W. Schuerman, whose Willow Creek generating plant was the first in Wisconsin to provide the convenience of electricity to a rural area.

Some portions of Richland County also had electrical service prior to 1935, when the Rural Electrification Act (REA) was announced. For example, the Balmoral Dam, on Mill Creek, had been constructed in 1898 to provide electricity to the Village of Muscoda. Over the years, until the Balmoral power plant was shut down in the early 1930s, some farmers in Eagle and Orion Townships were able to connect to the Balmoral lines. These connections were made entirely at the farmers’ expense. After the Balmoral generator was turned off, Wisconsin Power and Light (WP&L) supplied power to the lines.

On the far west side of Richland County, the “Sylvan Line,” based in Viola, served just forty-three farmers. In 1919 these farmers had created an electric cooperative in order to get distribution lines installed and to operate and maintain a generator. The initial cost to a farmer was \$400.00, an enormous sum to raise in the post- World War I depressed economy. In 1927 a nasty ice storm knocked out the power lines. The repairs took three months because periodic heavy snowfalls delayed the work and, sometimes, damaged the repairs already accomplished. The Sylvan Line came to an end in 1937, when its farmer-subscribers connected to the Richland Electric Cooperative (REC) lines.

Yuba residents were the benefactors, in 1914 when Robert Novy installed a little gas-powered generator in the basement of his tavern. Novy ran his generator Monday mornings so that a few fortunate housewives could do a washing and he ran it on Tuesday mornings so that they could do the ironing. (There was no wash-and-wear clothing!) And the generator lit electric lights in the evenings, from twilight to midnight. In 1925 Novy bought the “old” Yuba grist mill, located on the Pine River, about one-half mile below the village. Soon, Novy had a concrete dam built to supply power to his new, larger generator. This machine could be powered by water, steam, or gasoline. We will save the conclusion of the history of Novy’s operation for later, weaving it into the struggle between the REC and WP&L for the right to supply electricity to the Yuba area.

Private utilities also supplied power to limited areas of Richland County prior to 1935. Wisconsin Power and Light, for example, had strung high-tension wires along Highway 14, reaching Lone Rock in 1918. Four years later, WP&L was stringing wire in Gotham. In 1925 WP&L bought out Fred Schuerman’s Twin Bluffs Electric Company and took over all of the facilities that Schuerman had constructed. But WP&L halted its march along Highway 14 at the city limits of Richland Center, where the City Utility supplied the power. The Northern States Power Company had pushed into Richland County from the west, by building a line along Highway 60. However, neither private utility sought to supply power to all County farmers. They believed that the farms were too spread out to amortize their investment over a reasonable number of years. So, in 1935, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the REA, a large portion of the County, north and west of Richland Center, remained in the dark.

Using authority granted by Congress in the Emergency Relief Appropriation Act of 1935, President Roosevelt created the REA by executive order on 11 May, 1935. Roosevelt issued this order because he had been convinced that private utilities would not supply electricity to farmers at reasonable rates. In fact, in terms of lighting up the countryside, the United States lagged far behind France and Germany, where 90% of the farms had electricity. In the U.S. the figure was just 11% of the farms. In addition, the President viewed the REA as an economic recovery measure, because electricity would enable farmers to increase their productivity and incomes.

Continued page 3

The REA was directed to concentrate its first efforts on rural areas that the private utilities had neglected. Richland County and all southwest Wisconsin qualified for assistance. The REA was authorized to lend the entire cost of constructing power lines and setting up generators in such areas. The loans would carry a 3% interest charge over a twenty year term. Priority was to be given to publicly owned plants distributing electricity. This term caused the Rural Electric Cooperative Association of Richland County to seek to purchase power from the Richland Center Utility, after WP&L demanded exorbitant rates for its power. (Private utilities regularly set rural rates as much as four times higher than urban rates, making electric service beyond the reach of cash-strapped farmers.) After a REA loan was repaid, the electric cooperative would own everything that had been acquired.

In Richland County, as elsewhere, a few men stand out as the leaders who guided an REA project to completion. In Richland County the individual who deserves the greatest recognition is A.V. Miller who, at the time, was serving as the County's first agricultural agent. Miller already had a well-deserved reputation as a "go-getter." Miller used this quality in December 1935 to assure that Richland County was among the first Wisconsin counties to apply for an REA loan.

A.Vernon Miller was born 18 July 1893 in Sidney, Ohio. The local archives do not contain anything about Miller's growing up years. He graduated from the Springfield, Ohio High School in 1911. Subsequently, A. V. enrolled in the Winona Lakes, Indiana Agricultural College. Later, he engaged in graduate work in science in Wittenberg College in Springfield, Ohio and in the University of Wisconsin.

In 1914, A. V. came to Osceola, Wisconsin, where he taught agriculture for three years. Next, he spent a year as the principal and Ag. Teacher at Patch Grove. In the fall of 1918 he began a long career at the Richland Center High School, as the agriculture teacher.

On New Year's Day 1917, A. V. Miller had married Jessie Schwartz of Vincennes, Indiana. The couple had two children, a daughter and a son. Jessie was a former stenographer and she and A. V. worked together on many projects as a team. She kept notes of meetings and typed materials for the agriculture classes. Jessie was especially valuable for many years as the secretary of the Richland County Fair Association.

When he began teaching in Richland Center, Miller was also the basketball coach. The records reveal that his 1919 team participated in the state finals, held in Superior. However, Miller quickly became so busy that he had to give up coaching.

Miller's first class had just 33 students, all boys. By the time he left teaching to become the county agricultural agent, in January 1934, his classes enrolled 147, including several "city boys," who were attracted by Miller's energy and innovations. At first the agriculture classes were taught in the chemistry lab. Soon, Miller's expanding enrollment and curriculum made the lab inadequate. The school board approved construction of a larger, dedicated classroom. A few years later, when a shop was needed for hands-on activities, the class members constructed the facility.

In 1923, recognizing a need to provide expert advice to County farmers, A. V. started a night class at Boaz. The topics included in this inaugural offering included farm electricity, proper feeding of dairy cattle, farm machinery and its care, and a few subjects suggested by class members. Word of these classes spread quickly across the County and, soon, Miller was teaching three nights a week at various locations.

In 1924, Miller initiated poultry and grain shows, which were held at the high school for several years. They were eventually incorporated into the Richland County Fair. Both displays grew rapidly. The next year, a few of Miller's students began taking their exhibits to the state fair, having been judged "best of show" at the County Fair. Soon, Miller began 4-H clubs in the County and arranged for a separate division in the County Fair for the members' exhibits.

In the late 1920's, A. V. Miller was elected president of the Wisconsin Association of Vocational Agriculture Teachers, an office he held for several consecutive years. In 1931 Miller was elected president of the national association and the next year, the national convention was held in Milwaukee.

Miller continually brought to Richland County the newest ideas in agriculture. In 1919 he began a thistle eradication program, using chemical herbicides. Soon, the toxic mixture was broadened to kill other weeds, too. The value of this campaign was so obvious that, in 1931, the County Board of Supervisors made a special appropriation to expand it.

In 1930, Miller convinced the school board to allow him to purchase a grain-testing machine. The device measured the moisture in the grain, so that the crop could be harvested in peak condition. The Ag. Boys did the testing after school hours. A small fee was charged for testing each batch. This revenue soon paid for the machine and the future profits were used to purchase additional equipment for the agriculture classes. During 1933 the Richland County Board of Supervisors approved the employment of a County Agricultural Agent. An impetus to this decision was the provision of aid by the federal government, to help support an agent's salary and the operation of an office. The County Agricultural Committee interviewed three candidates for the position in December, 1933. The three men were Mr. Miller, Mr. Kilkelley, and Mr. Eckley. Kilkelley and Eckley already were county agents, who evidently saw the Richland County position as an opportunity to improve their circumstances. Before the final vote, Eckley eliminated himself from consideration, when he insisted he had to have a salary slightly higher than the proposed rate.

On the first, and only ballot, the committee members voted, four for Miller and one for Kilkelley. Miller was immediately offered the position and he accepted. His salary was \$2,000.00 per year, plus \$700.00 for travel expenses. Both of these amounts were subject to adjustment if the federal aid was reduced. The initial projects assigned to Miller were Storm Relief, Club Work (Boys and Girls Clubs and 4-H Clubs), Alfalfa Cultivation, and Erosion Control. Miller began his duties on 2 January 1934 in an office in the County Courthouse.

A.V. Miller died, after a seven week illness, in mid-November, 1957. He had served almost twenty-three years as Richland County's agricultural agent. Miller's obituary in *The Republican Observer* recognized his many accomplishments, stating, "Many of Richland County's successful programs were the result largely of Mr. Miller's progressive thinking and enthusiasm. One program was never completely over before he had plans to make the next bigger and of greater advantage to those it was designed to help." *The Richland Democrat* echoed these words with, "He was probably the County's most outstanding citizen at the time because of his leadership in agricultural circles and his ability to act as an agent between agricultural groups and business and civic interests." As we shall see, A. V. Miller brought all of these qualities into action as he shepherded Richland County's REA project to success.

President F. D. Roosevelt had created the REA by executive order on 11 May, 1935, but several months passed before the national and state REA offices were opened, so that farmers could organize electric cooperatives and apply for an REA loan to begin construction.

The creation of the REA spurred the Wisconsin Power and Light Company to attempt to expand its lines in Richland County to head off the formation of an electric cooperative. Specifically, WP & L began staking out a line around Richland Center, to the west, and then along Highway 14 for several miles. Another line was staked north of the city along Highways 80 and 56, into Richland, Rockbridge, Marshall, and Henrietta Townships, for ten to twelve miles. Farmers, naturally, were interested in this development. However, farmers who did not live right along the proposed lines soon learned that their farms would not be served or that the connection would cost far more than they could afford.

One of those farmers was Theron Janney, whose farm was about one-fourth mile from the WP & L proposed line along Highway 56. When he inquired about getting connected, Janney was told it would cost \$500.00, almost one-fourth of his annual income! The very next day Janney went to Richland Center and met with County Agent Miller and attorney Francis Brewer, both of whom were working toward organizing an electric cooperative. Janney's story triggered the calling of a meeting to decide how to stop the WP & L lines.

The farmers, in their meeting, decided on an immediate course of action. They would lobby the Marshall and Rockbridge Town Boards, which had already approved WP & L's request to begin construction, to halt the work until the farmers' appeal to the Public Service Commission (PSC) for an injunction could be heard and decided. Fortunately, both town boards agreed with the appeal and presented the foreman of the line construction crew with a written request to halt construction. The foremen complied. In a couple of months the PSC issued an injunction that stopped WP & L from building any more lines until the electric cooperative had time to canvass farmers to determine if to have WP & L or the electric cooperative supply them with electricity.

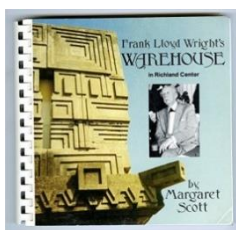
In the meantime, On Christmas night, 1935, a small group of farmers-Bert Kelsey, Thomas Foley, Martin Janney, Theron Janney, and Everett Reed-gathered in Miller's living room to sign the incorporation application for the Richland Electric Cooperative Association, which attorney Brewer had prepared. Within a few days, Miller filed the incorporation papers at the Richland County Courthouse and in the Secretary of State's office in Madison. In due time the application was approved and the RECA was officially in business. All of these actions caused WP & L to intensify its campaign to stop the RECA from succeeding. Years later, Harvey Schermerhorn, director of public relations for the Wisconsin Electric Cooperative Association, wrote, "It touched off the most bitter dog-eat-dog opposition on the part of a private power company ever recorded in Wisconsin. Richland County became the battleground of the state, where unprecedented strategies and counterstrategies were conceived and tested around the clock, with no holds barred."

Now, WP & L began circulating "rumors" among Richland County farmers about what would happen if they signed up with the RECA. For example, the private utility warned that farmers would have to mortgage their farms to raise the capital to get the REA lines constructed. If the cooperative failed, they would lose their farms. Another rumor cautioned that, if the RECA collapsed, the members would be personally responsible for any debts. WP & L forewarned that the cooperative would advertise low rates to get farmers to sign up but, afterward, the rates would rise rapidly. One blast asserted that a "bunch of farmers" couldn't successfully operate an electric company. It was just too complicated. Service would be poor and intermittent.

To be continued and concluded in the October, 2017 edition of the AKEY BrAKEY News

Check out our website for the past issues of the AKEY BrAKEY News

→ www.richlandcountyhistoricalsociety.weebly.com



Check out Margaret Scott's 1989 book available at Hynek Printing for just \$15.00
84-60122 [Frank Lloyd Wrights Warehouse in Richland Center](#)

It's also available on line at a noticeably higher price of \$63.00

<https://www.amazon.com/Wrights-warehouse-Richland-Center-Wisconsin/dp/B0006EFDXY>

The Town That Maps Forgot

Richland County “Community” is a museum of vintage treasures

by Mike McNair

The following article is reprinted with permission from *OUR WISCONSIN* magazine from their February/March edition. The pictures have been included for the article adjusted to the copy of the *AKEY BRAKEY* edition without the captions.

YOU WON'T FIND the town of Stevenson on a Wisconsin map. Did cartographers simply forget to include a community that has its own police station, fire station, doctor's office, telephone company, barbershop, and general store?

Nope – Stevenson isn't a town in the usual sense, but an amazing by-appointment-only museum of objects from yesteryear. The telephone company display depicts a woman connecting callers the old-fashion way' the police station features a drunk passed out in a cell, and the smiling doctor treating a child in his office is in memory of longtime Richland County physician Dr. Killian Meyer. More than a dozen unique antique



vehicles are here including a 1923 Model T snowmobile. Located on a 240 –acre parcel in one of Richland County's breathtaking secluded valleys in southwestern Wisconsin, Stevenson is just a short meander from Richland Center, Boaz or Bosstown.

My wife, Nancy, and I got a personal tour from founders Steve and Carol Stevenson, who comprise the entire populace of this “village”.

Steve serves a mayor, police chief, fire chief, bank president, and all other positions of authority. Carol's in charge of streets and sanitation – cleaning up after their dogs, Molly, a Scottie, and Dolly a Westie. They've been married 45 years.



For Old Time's Sake

“I brought my grandmother's rocking chair and an antique picture to our marriage,” Carol says. “Steve commented that they'd look good ... in the garage!” she laughs.

But when Steve found a nice old Coke machine for \$35, “he got bit by the antique bug”, Carol claims. That started decades of collecting.

The Stevenson's originally lived in Bartlett, Illinois, then one summer day in 1989 ...

“We decided to tour the House on the Rock,” Steve recalls. “We stopped at a local gas station and picked up a newspaper. Carol saw this farm in the classifieds – 40 acres, rock outcroppings, hardwoods, secluded – for \$23,000.”

Quite a difference from suburban Chicago prices!

The original 40 acres didn't suite them, so the owner offered 60 acres where their house now stands.

“We'll take it!” we both said simultaneously,” Steve laughs. Then within 2 days, they'd bought the entire 240 acre farm!

“We make quick decisions,” Carol explains, adding, “I decided I was going to marry him the night we met, and it took him 3 days to ask me.”

The Stevenson property has had many identities since the couple moved here – tree farm, fish farm, and a place to raise llamas and alpacas.

But the museum has always been the main focus. When they moved, Steve and Carol brought with them many collected items, including an old sleigh and the police station setup, which had been in their game room.



“Gathering the rest of the museum’s contents took us 9 years,” Carol says, “but our collecting’s never really finished.”

All Dressed Up

Every purchase has a story. For instance, take some of the museum’s clothing.

While the Stevenson’s were building on the Wisconsin property, Carol heard about Mary Thompson, a vintage clothing collector in Illinois. The two got in touch by phone.

“At the end of our phone conversation, Mary said something that puzzled me,” Carol recalls. “She said, ‘You’re the answer to my prayers!’ ”

When they met to see Mary’s collection, she sported a big yellow hat with flowers all over it, and showed Carol her vintage purses and rack after rack of clothes she’d collected over 40 year.

During the next 6 months, the two became friends, and Carol asked Mary if she’d consider selling some of her clothing to the museum.

Mary smiled and said, “I was going to give it all to you!”

Carol rushed to Mary’s son’s apartment and told him his mother said she was going to give all the clothing to her. Was that okay?

“Back your truck up!” he shouted. “Let’s start loading.”

Steve notes, “That’s why we named the general store after her – Mary Thompson’s Mercantile.”

Mary always wished that her extensive clothing collection would remain together. Thanks to Steve and Carol, her wish was granted.

If your wish is to visit a fun place where time stands still, mark your map for a visit to the Town of Stevenson, even if cartographers appear to have forgotten.



 Interested in visiting? Only groups are admitted by appointment, eight person minimum. Call Carol or Steve at 608-538-3900.

Mike McNair is a retired educator with thirty five years experience as an English teacher and high school guidance counselor.

Mike wrote biweekly column for Midwest News from 2005 until 2014 and has written a novel as well as several books. He is a field editor for *Our Wisconsin* and has written a number of features for the magazine.

You can contact Mike at <http://mikemcnair.yobasite.com/>



“RE-SEARCHING” THE EARLY HISTORY OF RICHLAND COUNTY

This article was introduced in an earlier edition to provide for ongoing information which highlights various topics of local interest.

** excerpted from <http://www.usgenweb.info/wirichland/books/1906-4.htm>

According to the first number of the Richland County Observer, there were thirteen post offices in the county in 1855, the names of which are given here for the satisfaction of the curious, together with the respective postmasters: Richland Center, Leroy D. Gage; Orion, B. Ferris; Richland City, C. B. Pearson; Sand Prairie, H. M. Miller; Sextonville, E. M. Sexton; Loyd, B. Hilencock; Cazenovia, A. Perkins; Neptune, J. Sippy; Syresville, M. Satterlee; West Branch, D. Barrett; Fancy Creek, Josiah McCaskey; Forest, R. J. Darnell; Sylvan, A. Savage.

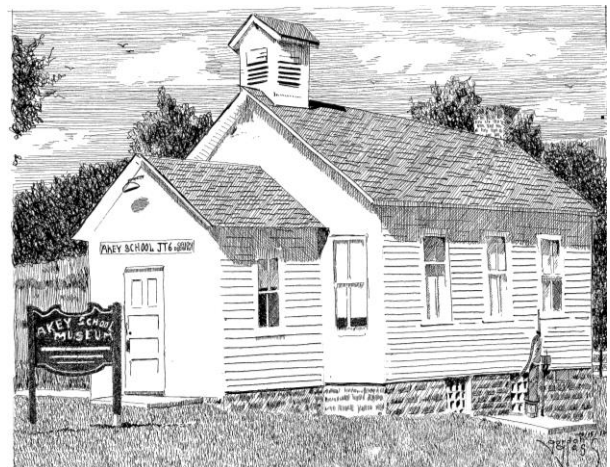
Among those early postmasters none had a more remarkable career perhaps than Joseph Sippy, the first postmaster at Neptune. He was one of the pioneers of Richland County, and was born near Harper's Ferry, Va., in March, 1791. His father was a native of France and came to America with La Fayette during the war for independence. He left home without the consent of his parents, and was not mustered into service until his arrival in America. After the declaration of peace he settled in Virginia. When the subject of this paragraph was seven years old his parents moved to Pennsylvania and settled in Beaver County, where he grew to manhood, receiving his education in the subscription schools. He was a stirring patriot and volunteered in the War of 1812, serving but a short time when he was honorably discharged. Soon afterward he was married to Martha Cogswell, whose mother was a sister of General Gates, of Revolutionary fame. In the year 1813 Mr. Sippy and wife immigrated to Ohio, making the trip with one horse, without a wagon, packing upon the back of the horse their household goods, including bedding and camp kettles. They made their way to the Cuyahoga River, in Cuyahoga County, and remained a few months. It was at that time an unhealthy country and consequently Mr. Sippy moved and settled in the town of Granger, Medina County, where he was an early settler. He lived there a few years and then moved to the town of Hinkley, in the same county, where he commenced the practice of medicine, and also, having purchased eighty acres of land, carried on a farm. In 1836 he sold out and again started west, and this time settled in Fulton County, Ind., where he was again a pioneer. In Indiana he made his chosen profession a business and had a lucrative practice. That country also proved to be somewhat unhealthful, and in 1852 he concluded to again change location, and accordingly made a visit to Richland County, coming from Indiana on horseback. Thinking this would be a desirable, healthy country, he returned to Indiana, and in September of that year returned with his family and settled on section 31 of what is now the town of Ithaca. He later selected three forties of land--the south half of the west quarter of section 4, town 9, range 2 east, and the southwest quarter of the southeast quarter of section 4, and he afterward bought additional land nearby until his place was increased to six hundred acres. He lived on section 31 two years, then removed to section 4 and commenced improvements on his land. He laid out the village of Neptune, erected a saw-mill, and made that place his home until the time of his death, which occurred in September, 1870. He had quite an extensive practice in the county, and was well and favorably known.

PRESIDENT'S CORNER

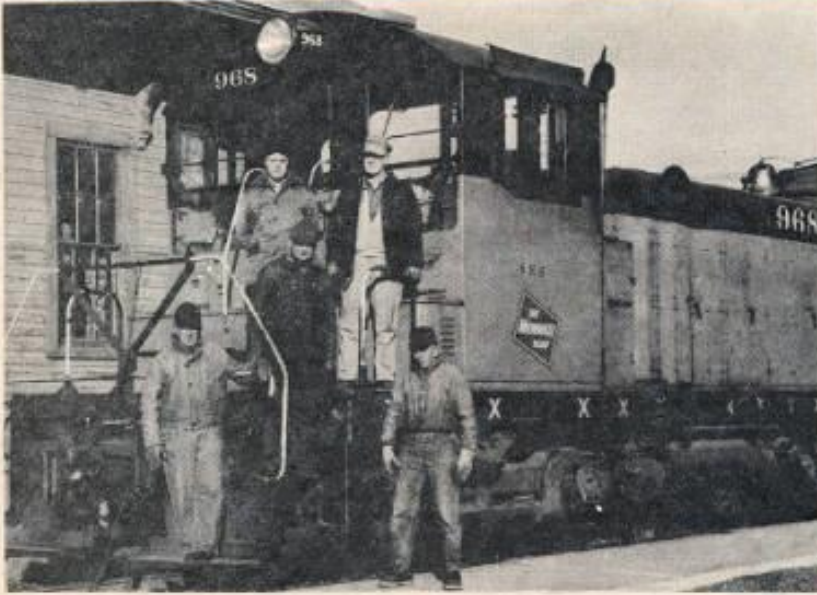
I would like to take this opportunity to introduce myself to all of the Richland County Historical Society members. I grew up in the eastern part of Richland County in Bear Valley, so I am very familiar with many of the unique and beautiful historical places in Richland County. I received my BA in Social Studies and History from the University of Wisconsin-Platteville in 2010. I was subbing in local districts and working at the Brewer Public Library up until this past year. Currently, I am the Public Library Director of the Kraemer Library and Community Center.

While I was working at Brewer, I had the opportunity to work in the Richland County History Room for two years organizing and cataloging all of the one room school records. In 2013 Ken and Jerry approached me to take over the treasurer position for the Richland County Historical Society and just recently I was asked to fill the big shoes of Dr. Jerry Bower, our long-time president.

by **Nick Studnicka**



Directions to the AKEY SCHOOL MUSEUM located east from Richland Center off Hwy 14 about four miles south on County TB or from Gotham on Hwy 60 west a mile and then north on County TB about four miles. The Akey School Museum is open Sundays from June thru September from 1 to 4 pm. **Please Come and Visit !**



Train Crew Makes Last Run On Branch Line

Harold Ray, Fireman; Forrest Voss, Engineer; Harry Mee, Conductor; Harry Dyer and Robert Esel, Brakemen, made their last run on the Richland Center branch line of the Milwaukee Road this Wednesday.

Richland Center will now have freight service only three days a week, Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays the train will leave Madison and service the branch line to Sauk City and then will go on to Marquette, Iowa, returning to Lone Rock and up to Richland Center on Tuesdays, Thurs-

days and Saturdays and then back to Madison.

Thus another era ends in Richland Center. This may be one of the reasons that our city has a hard time getting industry to locate here because of the lack of dependable rail service as many industries prefer to use the railroads to trucks.

A photo of the first engine to make the run on the Richland Center branch line will be found on another page of this week's Republican Observer.

Republican Observer photo

REPUBLICAN OBSERVER
Richland Center, Wis.
Thursday, January 26, 1961

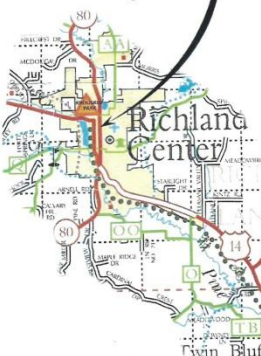
In our April & October 2016 issues we included an excerpt from the History of Richland County about the railroad line from Lone Rock to Richland Center. Pictured at the left is the last run of the train from Lone Rock to Richland Center from the Richland County Digital History of the Brewer Library website.

What was the railroad that ran until the early 1960's is now the Pine River Bike Trail. We're including the following: <http://ci.richland-center.wi.us/parks-rec/recreational-trail/> about the Pine River Recreational Trail.

This easy-graded rail trail invites hikers and cyclers in spring, summer and fall, and snowmobilers in winter. This 14.3-mile trail is laid on an abandoned rail bed, and gives riders a chance to enjoy the beauty of 250-foot river bluffs without having to ride over them.

It gives access to the restored Railroad Depot at the corner of Seminary Street and Orange Street (US Hwy 14). It also allows passage through an arboretum and the restored savannah prairies at the site of the old mill dam. The dam, removed to allow a free flowing river, now is the site of riffels where anglers fish and canoeists can continue their down river journey. The arboretum is part of the bike trail enhancement. The site has nearly 200 varieties of trees and shrubbery nestled along the Pine River just south of the Seminary Street Bridge. Above the Seminary Street Bridge, the remnant bed of the Mill Pond has dried and is planted in tall prairie grass. Comprising of nearly 60 acres, the area is intersected by a historic suspended footbridge accessible from the dike bike trail.

In Richland Center, the trail starts/ends in Krouskop Park on Hwy. 14 West. In Krouskop Park, there is adequate parking, toilet facilities and drinking water.



In Twin Bluffs there is parking, a shelter, a picnic table, and a porta-potty.



PINE RIVER Recreation Trail



In Gotham, the town park is on Fulton Street, one block south of the trail and its intersection with Hwy. 60.

In Lone Rock, from Hwy. 130 go west on Richland Street to the trail head/end. There is parking here.

C/o Richland County Historical Society
460 N. Jefferson St.
Richland Center, WI 53581