

# The AKEY BRAKEY News

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a bi-annual newsletter from the Richland County Historical Society

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## Recollections of Growing Up in Richland Center During World War II

by Kent C. Houck

*This will be a two part series presented in both this issue and in the October issue of The AKEY BRAKEY News*

World War II began, for the United States, in December 1941 and ended in August 1945. Many of the people, both soldiers and civilians, who personally experienced the war are gone now.

I was 6 years old when the war broke out and was attending first grade at Washington School in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin. I remember the radio programs describing the attack on Pearl Harbor. I thought that the Japanese were going to attack Wisconsin and Beaver Dam at any minute and I was frankly very frightened. My parents explained to me that the Japanese and Pearl Harbor were a very long distance from Beaver Dam. The explanation helped quell my fear.

In 1942 my family moved to Richland Center where my father opened a men's clothing store, Houck and Bowen, in the Edwards Building, on the corners of Church and Court streets. It took extraordinary courage to open a clothing store with the country fully engaged in war. Our family of four, Nelson, Alice H. Bowen Houck, my brother Bowen D. Houck, and I, lived for a while on Central Avenue, here in Richland Center, with my mother's parents, Dr. Charles and Georgia Bowen. We later moved to an apartment on the third floor above the store. And it is my impressions and memories of these war year activities that I write about here.

One of the first consequences of the war that affected every family in the USA was rationing. Within a short time after Pearl Harbor the entire country was put on a rationing system and books of ration coupons for many essential items were distributed to each individual citizen: women, men, and children each received ration books. Each county in Wisconsin and in other states had a Rationing Board made up of citizens who distributed the ration coupon books, and the local Rationing Board was actually located in our store building. In some communities the Rationing Board might be set up in the Post Office or a convenient municipal building. Food and other items in short supply were available for purchase only with the coupons for the appropriate week: the coupons had a specified week for use imprinted on them. Sugar, gasoline, beef, pork, and anything made with steel were tightly rationed. Scrap drives were implemented to collect any old iron or steel to be recycled for the war effort. The Japanese, by invading the countries that produced rubber, controlled all of the rubber production for the world and the invention of synthetic rubber had not yet been perfected for practical use. *Continued Pg. 3*

The insert for this issue of *The AKEY BrAKEY News* was provided by Lon Arbegust from a presentation he made on April 14th in the City Auditorium supporting both the Richland County Room at the Brewer Library & Richland Center Performing Arts Center

## Rockwell's Photo Studio – The History of Richland Center, Photography, and Postcards – The “Golden Age” 1898-1918

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The historical development of Richland Center as a commercial center supporting agriculture and the surrounding community is reflected in the many existing buildings dating from the mid 1850's through the First World War. Richland Center enjoyed a rapid growth in wealth and building as a result of the creation of the Pine River and Stevens Point Railroad in 1875. This railroad linked the local economy to markets well beyond Richland County. This period of economic growth resulted in the proliferation of a more diverse variety of businesses and professions.

One of the many interesting enterprises was that of professional photographer. Even though there are no photographers listed in the public record before 1891, Margaret Helen Scott notes in her unpublished manuscript “The Picture Galleries of Richland Center, WI”, the first such gallery was started by Ira Swetland sometime around 1858, which was then sold to J.A. DeVoe and N.L. James. There were a number of picture galleries operating during the 1860's spurred by the demand for military portraits of local civil war participants. Galleries of this period include Miner and James, Ward and Burnham, Leo and Shutz, L.R. Train, R.M. DeLap, Miller and Moulden, H.G. Myres, and E.M. Liscum.

The following decades of the nineteenth and early twentieth century saw more galleries come and go; Ennor and Skewis, Robert Locke, Ennor and Wilmerson, William Hillman, and Frank Leonard. Examples of the work done by many these early studios are now quite rare, although the **Richland County History Room** does have a representative collection from this time period available for viewing.

These early photographs were daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, and tintypes. Tintypes had become the most widespread photographic technique used in the United States by the Civil War period. Tintypes became displaced by the invention of modern processing techniques and the invention of the reloadable camera by the Kodak Company in 1903.

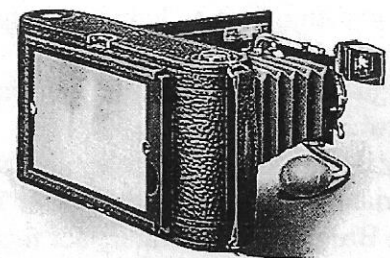
The William Hillman studio operated from 1882 through 1912 as an independent company and, in some instances, with Frank Leonard. Alfred Rockwell, the primary subject of our story, came to Richland Center in 1906 and took over the Leonard Studio. W.J. Huebner bought the Hillman studio in 1912 and then sold it to Frank R. Dickson. Life in Richland Center during the years from 1906 through World War One are well documented by these three studios; Hillman, Rockwell, and Dickson. These years generally coincide with the “Golden Age” of postcards.

( ← view: glass plate negative, early Richland Center)

Deltiology, the name in the United States for postcard collecting, is the third largest collectable hobby in the world. It is surpassed only by coin and stamp collecting; almost any subject imaginable has been portrayed on a postcard. There are eight distinct eras in the history of postcards: 1. Pre-Postcard era 1840-1869 2.

Pioneer era, 1870-1898 3. Private Mailing Card Era, 1898-1901 4. **Undivided Back Era, 1901-1907** 5. **Divided Back Era, March 1, 1907-1915** 6. Early Modern Era (White Border), 1916-1930 7. Linen Card Era 1930-1945 8. The Photochrome Era, 1939-present. For the most part, we will be looking at examples from The Undivided Back Era and the Divided Back Era; the “Golden Age” of postcards, which for our purposes, we will define as the twenty year period from 1898 to 1918.

The publishing of printed postcards during the Undivided Back Era doubled almost every six months. European publishers opened offices in the United States and imported millions of high quality postcards. By 1907, European publishers accounted for 75% of all postcards sold in the United States. As a result of this deluge,

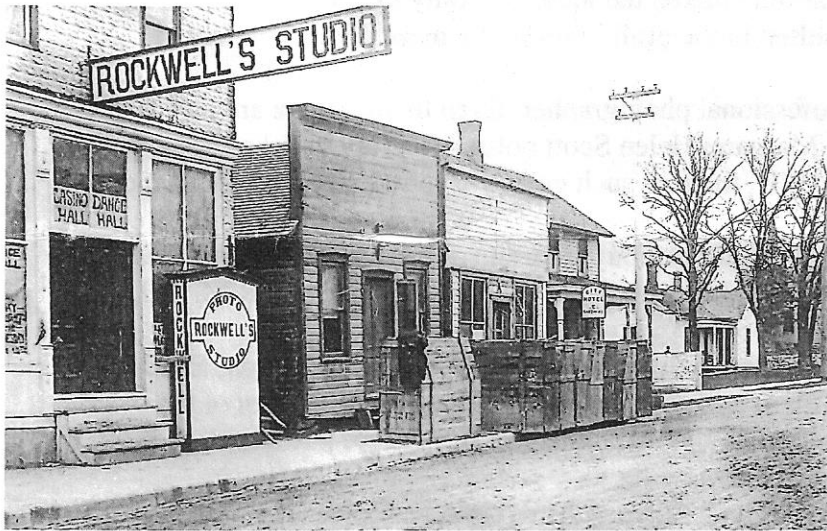


Showing Combination Back with Focusing Screen



the Eastman Company introduced an affordable “Folding Pocket Kodak Camera” in 1903. This allowed the photographer to create black and white photographs and have them printed directly onto paper with a postcard back. Various additional Kodak models, as well as other manufacturers, followed further igniting the postcard era. There were two features of the Kodak camera that fueled this phenomenon; the negatives were postcard size, resulting in a quality image, and the cameras had a door allowing access to the negative in order to scribe a description or comment directly onto the negative.

Figures from the U.S. Post Office for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1908, cite 677,777,798 postcards mailed. The total population of the U.S. at that time was 88,700,000. This was coincidental with Albert Rockwell acquiring the Leonard Studio in 1906. The Rockwell Photo Studio produced many postcards along with subjects



and portraits we would recognize today as typical professional photography products. Margaret Scott mentions in “The Picture Galleries of Richland Center, WI” that Albert Rockwell had a reputation for quality and innovative work. Our presentation will feature many examples of Rockwell’s work as well as representative postcards and photographs from this era by other photo studios that feature the city and life in Richland Center during this time.

Motion pictures came to Richland Center in 1904 when the Pier Opera House featured a kinescope production. Albert Rockwell was not far behind; he was the first, perhaps only, of the local photographers to produce a motion picture in

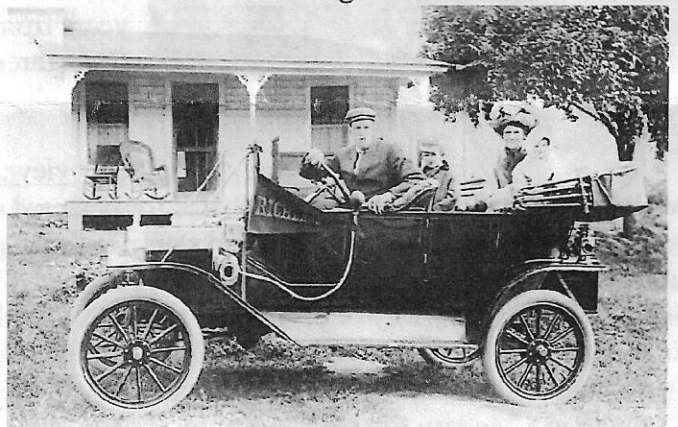
Richland Center. The Rockwell movie “The Little Mother’s Sacrifice” by the Home Players Film Company was produced in 1916 with the premier held at the Richland Center Auditorium. Some of the exterior production took place at the Fred and Julia Bowen house at 220 East Union Street here in Richland Center in addition to other identifiable local areas. The film was shown in additional venues throughout the county including a viewing in Viola.

*To be continued...*

Please enjoy our look back at life in Richland Center one hundred years ago. We are fortunate to be able to show you quality photographs from the Rockwell Photo Studio and others that illustrate what our town and surrounding area looked like during that time. We have also tried to give some insight into the individual who created many of these images as well as a bit of the Rockwell family history. Often times we get historical narratives about people and places; we hope you enjoy the added visual aspects of our “Historical Heritage Tour of Richland Center, WI” through the black and white pictorial art of Albert Rockwell’s Photo Studio.

Many thanks to Crystal Foley and Nita Liska, historians at the **Richland County History Room** at the Brewer Public Library for their help in compiling this narrative. A special thank you goes to Danny Sheafor for allowing the use of his colorful “The Town of Towns” and “There Won’t Be Anything Left Around” postcards in the presentation.

Rockwell’s Photo Studio – The History of Richland Center Through Black & White Photography -- Vintage Postcards “The Golden Age” 1898 - 1918



The **Richland County History Room** is located in the **Brewer Public Library** at 325 North Central Avenue. Our community has a wonderful resource in the **Brewer Public Library** and the **Richland County History Room**. Go take a look!

\*\*\*Look forward to additional excerpts in future issues \*\*\*

## MEMBERSHIP RENEWAL

By Jerry Bower

During their March 2011 meeting, the Board of Directors voted to have the membership year in the Richland County Historical Society run from July 1<sup>st</sup> through June 30<sup>th</sup>. Previously, the membership year corresponded to the calendar year. In their discussion of the issue the directors decided that there were many distractions in December and January that could cause members to forget to renew their membership.

So, last June I wrote an Annual Report of the Society's 2010-2011 activities and sent it, along with a membership renewal form and a self-addressed envelope, to all current and about two dozen prospective members. The response was gratifying and appears to indicate the change was the right decision. Currently we have 54 members, including 14 lifetime members. And we received \$357.00 in contributions toward the Akey School Museum expenses.

Consequently, I will repeat this procedure during June 2012. There will be a different address on the self-addressed envelope because Barb Cody volunteered to be the Society's Membership Secretary, relieving Treasurer Bonnie Arbegust of that task. I hope that you will decide to renew your membership when the mailing arrives. If you know of someone who should be invited to join, please let me know. My phone number is (608) 647-4860 and email [bowerpost@countyspeed.com](mailto:bowerpost@countyspeed.com).

## THE RICHLAND COUNTY FAIR

By Jerry Bower

The 2012 Richland County Fair will be the 150<sup>th</sup> fair held in the County. The first County "Exhibition," sponsored by the newly formed Richland County Agricultural Society, was held at Thompson's Hall, on Main Street, in early October 1857. The next three Fairs, 1858-1860, were held on the Courthouse grounds. Fairs were suspended during the Civil War, 1861-1865, but were revived by the Agricultural Society in 1866. The following year the exhibits overflowed the Courthouse Square and the Society's members decided that a more spacious fairgrounds was needed. Subsequently, about four acres on East Haseltine Street (approximately the 600 block) was purchased from Caleb Waggoner, for \$400.00. The annual fair was held on this site for five years, by which time the event had outgrown this space. In March 1873 the Society made its first purchase of property north of the City. This is the nucleus of the present fairgrounds. The Agricultural Society sponsored an annual Fair through 1956. During their January 1956 meeting, the Society's members voted unanimously to turn over the fairgrounds to Richland County. The County Board tentatively accepted the offer, pending the outcome of a referendum held during the presidential election. The voters readily approved the transfer of ownership, 4,815 to 2,096. The County Board Fair Committee has operated the Fair since 1957.

## THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER *By Jerry Bower*

September 5-9, 2012, will be the Sesquicentennial of the Richland County Fair. The Richland County Agricultural Society sponsored the first "exhibition" on the Courthouse grounds in September 1857. The fairs were not held during the Civil War, 1861-65. The Society revived the event in 1866 and a fair has been held annually ever since. The Agricultural Society, finding it difficult to sustain its membership, voted, in 1956, to turn operation of the fair over to Richland County. The County Board agreed, after a referendum in November 1956 overwhelmingly approved the transfer. Richland County has sponsored the fairs since September 1957.

The Historical Society is helping with the 150<sup>th</sup> celebration by underwriting the purchase of 300 "limited\* edition" commemorative pewter ornaments, which will be sold during the Fair. The ornament has been designed by David Ewing. The Society will recover its investment through the sale of the ornaments.

Please plan to attend this very special celebration.



*Page 3 Continued from Pg. 1* Because of the rationing of rubber products, tires for vehicles were very precious. Patching punctures in tires was a skill in high demand and patching kits were a necessity.

Gasoline was rationed right from the beginning of the war. The Ration Board issued 3 classes of gasoline allotment stickers and citizens applied the stickers to the windshield of their vehicle for their particular allotment designation. Coupons were issued in booklets for gasoline use per month. Red windshield stickers, indicating unlimited allotment, were for doctors, law enforcement personnel, and other essential occupations. Green stickers were for citizens who needed to use a vehicle for a less essential job but still needing transportation that was crucial to the war effort. The black sticker was the most common one issued and was used by citizens in ordinary occupations. The black sticker allowed the purchase of five gallons of gasoline per month. My grandfather, Dr. Charles F. Bowen, had a red sticker, of course, until someone turned him in for fishing in a trout stream. Grandpa was an avid fisherman and often when out on a house call and waiting for a baby to be born, he would sneak off and fish for a while. The family was instructed to come get him when the delivery was more imminent. He lost the red sticker either when fishing on the way home from a house call or while waiting for a delivery, regardless of the situation he lost the sticker. Needless to say, he was very unhappy to be demoted to a green sticker.

Every county had a Draft Board that administered the draft of young men into the military. There were exemptions from the draft for certain occupations, physical conditions such as poor eyesight, and other situations. The local Board made the decisions but the decisions could be appealed to a higher level board. The head of the Draft Board here in Richland County was Ellis Lee, the editor of the Richland Democrat newspaper. Ellis and Nina Lee lost their only son in the war. My father, Nelson S. Houck, was called into to the Draft Board for examination, but was not drafted to serve. He was beyond the age limit by the time the USA was engaged in the war. The dark side of the war years were, of course, the casualties of the wounded and killed soldiers. The Spangler family lost a son, Elmer, on Thanksgiving Day as his Flying Fortress bomber crashed on take off in India headed for a raid into Burma to destroy Japanese positions. Lieutenant Spangler was a navigator for the Flying Fortress and flew on 7 missions in that war zone. Elmer's brother, Francis Spangler, was badly wounded in the Battle of the Bulge. I knew about the Spangler family loss because they were next door neighbors to my grandparents and my brother was good friends with the Spangler boys. My grandmother, as did so many women and men, wrote letters every week to her 5 grandsons in the military, including my brother, Bowen D. Houck, who was drafted into the US Army when he turned 18 years of age just shortly after graduating from high school. He was on a troop ship headed for the Philippine Islands when the war with Japan ended. He spent the balance of his service in the Army in Manila, and, because he could use a typewriter efficiently, was assigned to do paper work sending the troops back to the USA. When Bowen came home in 1946, he improved my capacity for swearing a great deal. The locally produced book, "News of Our Men and Women in Service," a scrapbook collection by Mariel Beeman Kepler, is an excellent source of information about the women and men who served so courageously in the military. **To be continued in the October issue of The AKEY BrAKEY News**