

# The AKEY BrAKEY News

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## **IRA S. HASELTINE: FOUNDER AND PROMOTER OF RICHLAND CENTER**

By Jerry Bower

Part Two of the story of how Ira Haseltine, the founder of Richland Center in 1850, managed to win the Richland County seat for his "paper village".

In 1851, the year that Ira Haseltine had his village site platted, the state legislature approved creation of Richland County which, until that time, had been part of Iowa County. The legislators authorized three Iowa County supervisors to decide which community ought to become the county seat. Haseltine, who never hesitated to seize an opportunity, quickly got to work to win the honor for his settlement.

Three communities in sparsely settled Richland County, population about 450, campaigned to become the county seat. Haseltine, of course, claimed that Richland Center should be selected because it was located near the center of the new county, in contrast to its most serious rival, Richmond (now Orion), which was located on the county's southern border, on the Wisconsin River. Haseltine argued that Richmond's location would be inconvenient for most of the county's eventual residents. The third contender, Florence, was sited on the Pine River, about a mile upstream from Richland Center. Florence already had a post office and a mill. But Haseltine soon sabotaged Florence's candidacy by spreading the rumor that Florence's land was heavily mortgaged and that, if Florence became the county seat, the county residents would be taxed to pay the mortgage.

In the summer of 1851, the three Iowa County supervisors decided to visit the three contenders before making their decision. We do not have a report of their reaction to Florence and Richland Center. However, Margaret Scott, in her *History of Richland Center* (8-9), wrote that Richmond was selected, "after a sumptuous feed" put on for the supervisors.

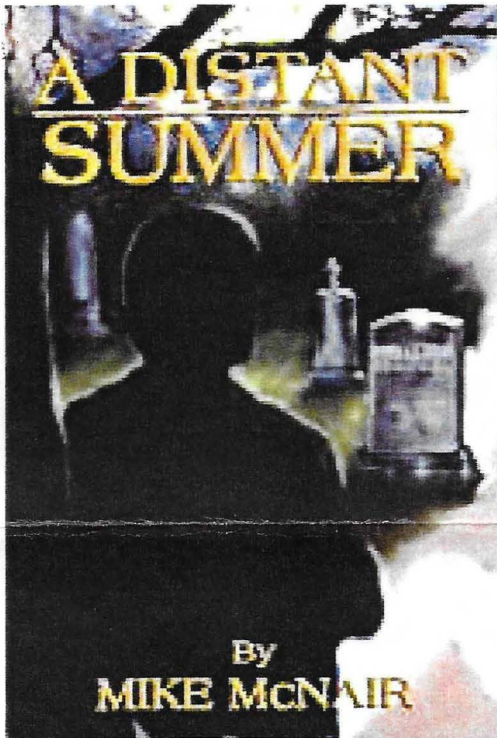
Naturally, Haseltine was outraged by Richmond's blatant bribery of the supervisors. He proceeded to raise such a furor that the three men threw in the towel and requested that the state legislature call an election to decide the issue. The election was set for early November, 1851.

The voting resulted in a victory for Richland Center by 48 votes. The tally was clear in three of the four precincts: Richland City precinct—Richland Center 103, Richmond 5; Richwood precinct—24 votes each; and Rockbridge precinct—Richland Center 16, Richmond 0. The tally from Richmond precinct was muddled, but Richmond had to have received 67 more votes than Richland Center to award the victory to the latter by 48 votes.

Now Richmond's partisans were outraged and they demanded an investigation of the results. The State Board of Canvassers granted their appeal and authorized two Iowa County justices of the peace to investigate and settle the dispute. After they had reviewed the ballots, the two justices of the peace concluded, "[The ballots] are so informal, both in form and substance, that we cannot ascertain the will of the people, and we hereby declare that there was no election held pursuant to the law."

Haseltine was not about to allow his victory to be overturned, so he convinced John Rutan, the Richland County Clerk, to bring the ballots to Ira's home. Here, Ira copied the tallies for each of the four precincts and had Rutan and John Price, the Chairman of the Richland County Board of Supervisors, certify that Ira's work was a "true copy" of the election results.

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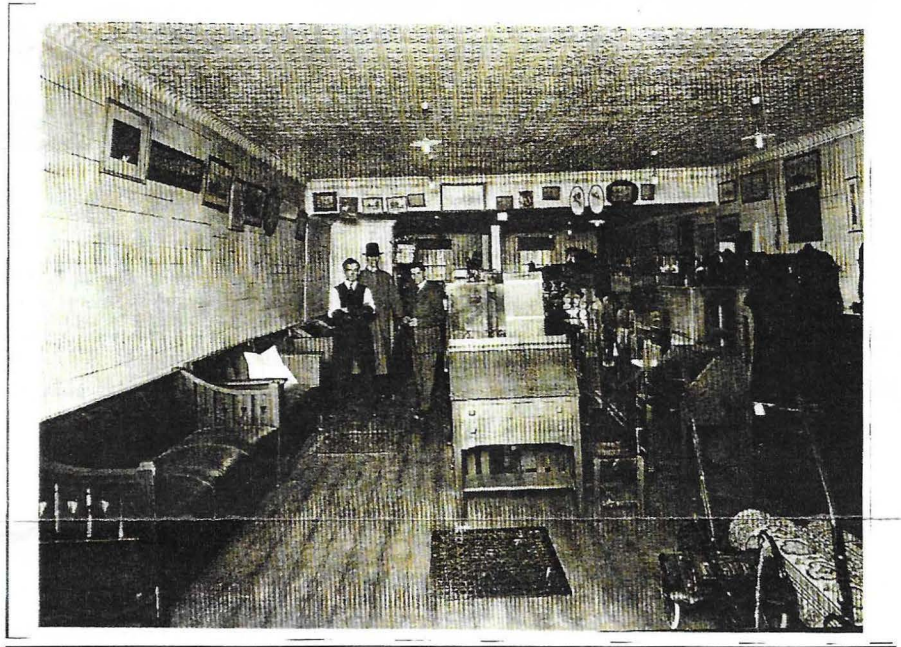
Recently a retired teacher from the Richland School District, Mike McNair, has authored a novel that is currently available to local readers.

In his own words, Mike states that "this book is a bittersweet love story that is timeless".

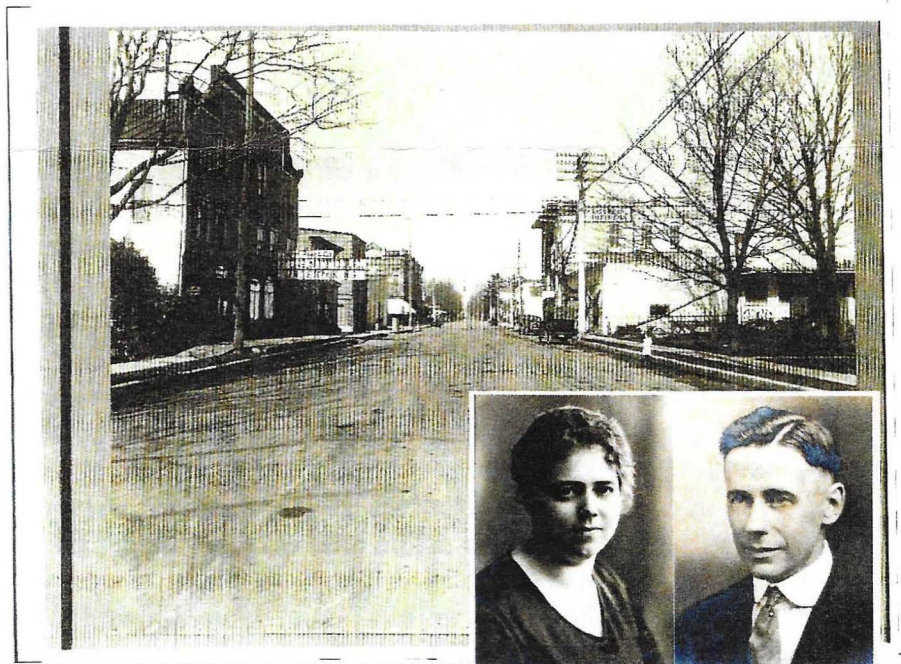
What makes this intriguing to historians is that Mike has written the novel based on experiences from what would be a typical Fifth Grade classroom set in the 1950's. Both the era and the small town appeal makes this a must read for any enthusiasts.

Mike also writes a bi-monthly column for Midwest News at [mwnews.net](http://mwnews.net).

If you would like more information about Mike's work; either interested in purchasing his book or if you would like to read his column, he can be reached at his website - [mikemcnair.yolasite.com](http://mikemcnair.yolasite.com)



From our spring edition we have included a few more pictures of the Toms family. Pictured above is an interior view of H. Toms Furniture and Undertaking owned by R. Arthur Toms. Pictured below is the exterior view that would be located across the street from the current Bindl Tire in Richland Center. The inset pictures are of Mae Clark Toms and Arthur Toms. There is some indication that Mae Clark Toms could be one of the first lady morticians in the state of Wisconsin.



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With this document in hand, Haseltine hurried to Madison, where he presented it to Secretary of State William Barstow and asked him to declare Richland Center the county seat. Barstow, who was well aware of the controversy, evidently did not want to render a decision. He delegated that task to the State Board of Canvassers who, like Barstow, had had enough of the Richland County fracas. The Canvassers, then, dumped the decision upon the legislature, without recommendation. At last, the legislators awarded the prize to Richland Center. Haseltine, perhaps, had aided his village's cause by providing two barrels of "toothsome winter apples" for the legislators during their deliberations!

In October 1851, a month before the election, Ira and his wife, Augusta, had offered the County Supervisors the use of twenty lots in the center of the village for "county purposes." In addition, they offered to rent a small frame building to the county for use as a courthouse. Even without our modern means of communication, we can be certain that news of the Haseltines' generosity traveled rapidly via the grapevine. Did these "bribes" influence how the residents voted? We will never know!!

Soon after the legislators rendered their verdict, the Supervisors accepted the twenty lots and rented the little building for a courthouse. Within four years the court's docket had, by far, outgrown the space. In that era, attending a trial was a form of entertainment. Consequently, in November 1855, the Supervisors voted to build a jail, for no more than \$500.00, and a courthouse, to cost no more than \$1,500.00.

Ira Haseltine won the bids for both structures, at \$1325.00. The jail, 18' X 26', was to be divided into two rooms. The cells' interiors would be covered by sheet metal to inhibit escapes. The courthouse, naturally, would be larger, 28' X 36', and two storied. County offices would be located on the ground floor, while the judge's chambers and the courtroom would take up the second floor. Within a year, both structures had been completed and were in use.

Unfortunately, three and one-half years later, in April 1860, the courthouse burned to the ground. The blaze began in the second floor courtroom, allegedly sparked by a carelessly discarded cigar butt, left by a member of the city band, which had used the courtroom for practice.

The next month the Supervisors voted to replace the structure, for \$2,500.00, with a brick courthouse. Haseltine again won the bid and soon set his crew to work. This time the courtroom was located on the ground floor, with the judge's chambers and clerk's office on the second level. As a fire prevention measure, the courtroom floor was constructed of bricks set on end.

Within four years, population increase and the accompanying growth of the court's docket outgrew this new courtroom. But the Supervisors resisted building yet another courthouse. So, the county and circuit judges, beginning in 1865, held court in various village opera houses, rented at county expense. Despite frequent prodding from the judges, the Supervisors did not agree to replace the courthouse until 1889. By that time Ira Haseltine had been gone from Richland Center for nearly twenty years or, one suspects, he would have bid on the project!

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## THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

*By Jerry Bower*

Each Sunday that I host at the Akey School Museum, I am reminded of what a gem it is! The rural Wisconsin schools have been closed for 45 years and many have disappeared. Last Sunday, 29 August, I had ten visitors during my shift. Among them was a man who had attended the two-room Boaz state-graded school. Among our artifacts he discovered a notebook cover from the Boaz School. He looked at the ads of the cover sponsors and reminisced about what had happened to those businesses. Before he left, he secured my address and promised to send pictures of his time at the Boaz School, which will be displayed in the notebook cover.

Next, three elementary teachers from the River Valley Schools arrived to do research for a new curriculum unit on the rural schools that they will teach this school year. They were thrilled to have the Akey School as a resource. They took dozens of pictures and made a video for their students that will help them teach about the one-room schools that once dotted Wisconsin like the measles.

I had a wonderful time hosting all ten of my visitors!