Save these dates on your 2019 calendar

4/15/19 Annual dinner & meeting at Trails Lounge, program by Dr Marc Seals, UW Baraboo, on “The History and Reception of Zona Gale’s Miss Lulu Bett as Novel, Play and Film.”

5/8/19 “Genealogy: Everyone’s a Beginner” by Lori Bessler of Wisconsin Historical Society, 6 pm

6/12/19 “Architectural Styles” by Judy Eulberg, 6 pm

8/17/19 “Friendship Village”

9/11/19 “The Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald: the Ship, the Storm, the Song” by Prof. Steve Ackerman, UW Madison College of Letters and Science, 5:30 pm

10/9/19 History of Curling in Columbia County, Mark Curtis, 6 pm

Thanks for your support in 2018!

Ellen Schieber demonstrated spinning at the annual Living Windows event in downtown Portage on behalf of the Portage Historical Society, and Vicki Vogts, PHS vice-president, greeted the crowds at the holiday parade with PHS president John Waldman behind the wheel, and Lila Waldman navigating.

You’ll be receiving a sponsorship renewal mailing in January, but your renewal is welcome anytime!

Pierre Pauquette level: $20-$49
Ansel Clark level: $50-$99
Zona Gale level: $100+

John & Kay Miller
Jeanne Mundt
Catherine Murphy
Bonny Oestreicht
Jan & Pete Price
Warren & Dorothy Rebholz
Deborah Rohrbeck
Gilbert Schwantes
Delores Wade
Beverly West
Dr. Thaddeus Whiting
Russ Wyman

Linda & Ronald Wendt
Pete, Diane & Michael Wenzel
Lucille Wheeler

Zona Gale
Peggy Amend
Kathryn Curtis
William & Jean Damm
Dennis & Maribeth Dorn
Dave & Judy Eulberg
Ann Marie Fuerst
Betty & Gerald Gast
Bob & Bobbie Goodman
Pat Halasz
Joe & Kathy Houzner
Stevens James
Betty & Bill Kutzke
Robin & Mike Kvalo
Mr & Mrs. Fred Langbecker
Sean & Peggy Malone
Pflanz Mantey Mendrala Funeral Home
Nan Rebholz
John & Florence Schieber
Dorothy Schultz
Stewart & Melody Taylor
Bill & Eleanor Voigt
John & Lila Waldman
The Winnebagos told him (Jean Nicolet) about their country and spoke of a great river in the west. So he was lured ... into the green valley of the Fox River streaming south and west from the foot of Green Bay. ... Nicolet kept on till the river shrank to a creek choked with wild celery and wild rice, and the Indians pointed to the portage path which led to a west flowing river. Perhaps Nicolet portaged there, over the mile wide strip of land, as the Indians had done for generations. Some historians believe his mossacian step was printed in that ancient trail (where now a highway parallels an unused canal) and that he saw the Wisconsin river on its way to the Mississippi.


The next day, the 10th of June, two Miami guides embarked with us in sight of a great crowd, who wondered to see just seven Frenchmen in two canoes dare to undertake so strange and hazardous a voyage. We knew that just 70 miles from the Mascoutens there was a river called Mesquiong [Wisconsin River] that empties into the Mississippi; ... but on the way [on the Fox River] was so cut up by marshes and little lakes that it would be easy to go astray, especially when the river was so covered with wild rice that you could hardly see the river ... So we had a good need of our two savage guides who led us safely to a portage. They helped us carry our canoes to a shallow lake where the current was so serpentine that you could hardly get your canoe straight. The canoe track was so narrow that it took most of the next day to proceed about three miles with our large canoes ... The next day we proceeded up the river which is slack water but very serpentine. It is so winding that we had to paddle three miles to advance one. ... That night we reached the carrying place [the site of Portage, Wisconsin] and for two days of hard labor, we carried our canoes and goods over the river for Wisconsin.

Peter Pond, *Jour deared, 1825*

At day-break, two ox carts, which I had ordered in the evening, came, and took our baggage across to the banks of the Fox River. The canoes were carried over by the different crews. On reaching the banks of the Fox River, I concluded to stay for the purpose of breakfasting. I added to the stock of eatables, a bag of potatoes and some flour, purchased from a Frenchman, who resided here. It was about nine o'clock AM when we embarked on the Fox, and we began its descent with a feeling not widely different from the steep side of a hill, that he may enjoy the pleasure of riding down. The Fox River is serpentine, almost doubled and redoubled, and its channel is choked with wild rice that in the fall boats would scarcely float across the stretch. Still it was property called, in the idiom of the times, “a height of land,” a divide between major watersheds.

David Lavender, "The Fist in the Wilderness" 1964

We now had 70 miles to pass through a country perfectly monotonous and uninteresting, the tastefulness of which was aggravated by the knowledge that we could, that had we been provided with horses or a carriage, have crossed over to the Portage through a pleasant country in little more than two hours. The wild rice abounds to the extent in many places, that it almost completely obstructs the progress of even a moderately sized boat, so that a passage through its tangled masses is with difficulty forced by the oars. ... When the Fort (Winnebago) was first pointed out to me, I exclaimed with delight, “Oh, we shall be there in half an hour!” “Not quite so soon,” said my husband, smiling. “Wait and see.” We sat and watched. We seemed to be approaching the very spot where we were to disembark. ... And to be sure, our course now turned, and we set setting in our first direction. In this manner, after tacking to right and left, and putting back and forwards during the greater part of two hours, we at length reached the little landing on which the assembled party stood ready to greet us.

Juliette M. Kinzie, *Way-Bun: the Early Day in the North-West, 1836*

Beyond Lake Winnebago the river twined like a dropped cord, Indian mythology said that once a huge snake decided to leave its home in the Mississippi for a visit to the Great Lakes, The trail the monster left collected rain and became the Fox River. Occasionally the meanders widen into wide shallow lakes. The muddy bottoms of some of these lakes sprouted acres of tall rushes which the Indians wove into mats; other lakes produced such tight stands of wild rice that in the fall boats would scarcely push through the heavy-headed stalks. Indians harvested canoes-full of the kernels and ducks, which congregated in unbelievable flocks on the small lakes, grew so that they could scarcely fly. On either hand stretched rolling prairies broken by groves of trees. It was the heart of what eventually would be called the dairyland of America. The soils of the upper river grew so tight that at the long canoes and bateaux, off the later fur trade would have difficulty negotiating the bends. Finally, near present Portage, the Fox bent almost completely back on itself. Less than two miles beyond the tip of the this hairpin curve lay another river, the Ouiscions, later refined to Wisconsin. The intervening land was low and swampy. During some spring floods, canoes cold actually float across the stretch. Still it was property called, in the idiom of the times, “a height of land,” a divide between major watersheds.

Henry Schs Loch, August 26, 1825

This subtle rise of land known to geographers as the Mid-Continental Divide separates the watershed of the Great Lakes, running east to the Atlantic via the St. Lawrence, from the watershed of the Ohio-Mississippi or Missouri river system, which drains the center of the continent south into the Gulf of Mexico. In the 15 thousand or more years since arising in North America from Asia, Native Americans had discovered the most efficient places to portage canoes across this divide, laying out their waterway equivalent of the Interstate Highway System, and along which centuries later, they guided the first Jesuit missionaries and voyageurs. Following one of these ancient Indian travel corridors the Overland Party now paddles down Lake Michigan to Green Bay, to the Fox River, and portage over a short stretch of marshy ground that marks the Mid-Continental Divide in central Wisconsin. They then relaunched their birch-bark vessels on the smooth, steady current of the Wisconsin River’s tea-colored waters.

Peter Stark, *Astoria: John Jacob Astor and Thomas Jefferson’s Lost Pacific Empire: A Story of Wealth, Ambition and Survival 2014*