

Museum Notes

for the week of November 6 – 12, 2022

by Kristen Parrott, curator

“Eight hours for work, eight hours for rest, eight hours for what we will.” That was the slogan of the labor movement back in 1886, when workers were organizing around the idea of a work day being eight hours rather than ten to fourteen hours.

Jeremiah Rusk of Viroqua was governor of Wisconsin at that time, and a small new exhibit at the museum explores the story of Rusk and the Milwaukee labor strike of 1886. Rusk moved to Viroqua in the early 1850’s and maintained a home here for the rest of his life, even when he was serving as Wisconsin governor (1882-1889) and U.S. Secretary of Agriculture (1889-1893). He died in Viroqua in 1893.

In 1886, while Rusk was governor, workers around the U.S. campaigned for an eight-hour work day. This campaign reached a critical moment in early May, when thousands of people across the country, including Milwaukee, went on strike. The Bay View Rolling Mills plant was the largest factory in Milwaukee still operating, and the protesters marched there to encourage its workers to join them.

Governor Rusk called up the militia, the Wisconsin National Guard, and sent it to Milwaukee to quell the strikes. The militia fired on the crowd outside the Bay View Rolling Mills, injuring and killing several people. This incident is remembered and commemorated in Milwaukee every year.

The new exhibit is an addition to our current exhibit about Jeremiah Rusk and his family. All the Rusk displays are located on the stairway landings between 2nd and 3rd floors at the museum. The inspiration for the new exhibit came from a visitor who, upon seeing the Rusk display, remarked that Rusk was his least-favorite Wisconsin governor, because of the Bay View shooting. It is a story that still resonates today.

The Vernon County Historical Society’s archives contains an abundance of information about Rusk and his family, including many articles about the labor strike. You can also learn about Rusk’s ancestors, his Civil War service, and his entire political career.

Visit any of the exhibits during regular winter public hours of Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, noon to 4PM. The museum and archives are also open by appointment, if those hours aren’t convenient. Contact us at 608-637-7396 or museum@vernoncountyhistory.org to make an appointment.