

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of February 24 – March 2, 2019

The history of Couleecap, a local Community Action Program founded in 1966, will be the topic of the museum's next free public program. Couleecap's executive director, Hetti Brown, will talk about the organization's half century of fighting poverty in the Coulee region. This event begins at 7PM on Tuesday, March 5, in the conference room here at the museum.

President Lyndon Johnson declared "War on Poverty" in 1964. Federal money was made available to the states and then to local agencies. In 1965, local people gathered in Viroqua to discuss how to combat poverty in Vernon County and nearby counties. These community organizers created Couleecap in 1966 to "respond to the needs and desires of low-income people in such a way as to promote self-sufficiency".

History usually ignores the poor. People with fine houses and good jobs, people in leadership positions, get remembered in articles and books and walking tours and museum exhibits. But those who are just getting by don't leave much of a mark in the historical record. We have to search for them, reading between the lines.

Old records from free public schools are one place to look for low-income people in the past. Compulsory school attendance laws were passed in Wisconsin in the late 1800s, so most children of all backgrounds should have been in school by 1900. Vernon County was well-served by one-room country schools, so there are lots of records to look through, and studying old class photos and school documents can tell us something about poverty in this region.

Census records are another place to search for the poor of long ago. Occupation, value of property, literacy, educational attainment, and income can be found on one or more of the currently-available U.S. censuses (through 1940). And on a census page you can learn more about a community or neighborhood – did the majority of people there rent or own their homes? Were they bank presidents or laborers? Was there a diversity of income among neighbors, or were most households living at about the same income?

Learn about the more recent history of regional solutions to poverty at the March 5 program. Everyone is welcome to attend. The museum's first-floor conference room is handicapped-accessible. Refreshments will be served after the program.