

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of March 25 – March 31, 2018

Growing up in De Soto in the 1950s and 60s will be the subject of the museum's next free public program. On Tuesday, April 3, at 7PM at the museum, retired teacher Harlan Flick will speak about and read from his 2014 memoir, *Coins in a Half-Filled Jar*. He writes that he had "a grand childhood, a glorious childhood, and a real childhood."

Harlan grew up playing, hunting, fishing, and trapping in the woods, waters, and marshes alongside the Mississippi River. The book's chapter headings alone give you a feel for this life: Chasing Minnows, Digging Worms in Wintertime, Fishing the Ponds, Coon Hunting, Late Fall Crappies, Fowl Weather, and of course, Traditions of the Hunt.

Everyone is invited to attend the program. Refreshments will be served afterward. Programs are held in the museum's handicapped-accessible conference room.

The museum will soon be switching to its spring hours. Beginning on April 1, the museum will be open Monday through Friday, noon to 4PM. These hours will continue through the months of April and May.

100 years ago, in March of 1918, a Viroqua family learned of the death of their 21-year-old soldier son on the front lines of the World War. He had enlisted the previous June from South Dakota, where he was living and working. His parents read about his death in a South Dakota newspaper that was sent to them. The local *Vernon County Censor* newspaper picked up the story, and ran headlines such as, "Viroqua Parents Mourn Death of Son Who Died in the Trenches Fighting for World Humanity" and "Chester Burkhardt, Former Viroqua Boy, First War Patriot to Give up Life in France".

It was a very sad story – but it turned out to be not true. A month and a half later, the *Censor* ran a new headline: "Young Soldier Not Dead: Chester Burkhardt is Alive and With the Colors." His parents never had received official word from the army about his death, but they feared him dead until they received letters from him dated March 28. As he had been reported to have died on March 1, these letters proved that he was actually alive.

This story was not unique during WWI. The Sletten family of Westby was also told that their son had been mortally wounded in the trenches of France. Erling Sletten was reported dead by both a newspaper and official army dispatch in June of 1918. Six weeks later his parents received a letter from him saying that he was alive, wounded but doing well in an army hospital.

Chester Burkhardt returned home in January of 1919, after being reported dead not once but twice. Despite having been shelled and gassed, he made it back to Viroqua with only a limp. Communication was so much slower 100 years ago, and the war made life so chaotic, that false death reports occurred with some frequency. What joy the families must have felt when their loved ones turned up very much alive.