

Museum Notes

by Kristen Parrott, curator
for the week of July 29 – August 4, 2018

Every year at this time, late July and early August, I remember that this is when the Black Hawk War ended so tragically, right here in Vernon County, in 1832. Black Hawk and his band of Sauk and Fox fled to Rising Sun on July 31 and then on through the Retreat and Red Mound area the next day. They ended up near the present-day village of Victory, on an island now called Battle Island, both of which got their names from the war's final day. On that day, August 2, 1832, most of Black Hawk's remaining followers were massacred at the edge of the Mississippi River.

Of course the museum has files covering the Black Hawk War, especially its end, but looking through them recently I saw a folder that didn't quite seem to fit the subject. "Battle Island Assembly" is the name on this folder, and the contents have little to do with the war.

It turns out that the Battle Island Assembly was a kind of camp meeting, a Chautauqua, that began well over 100 years ago. An October 1902 article written by Ida E. Tilson in a periodical called *The Rostrum*, explains how the event began:

"Battle Island, Wisconsin, is one of the younger summer assemblies, but has a peculiar and sufficient reason for its existence. The Pioneer Society, which manages it, is the direct result of an interesting trip over the territory by Reuben G. Thwaites, secretary of the Wisconsin Historical Society, who is an authority on the Black Hawk war. He and a party of local historians went over the last thirty miles of Black Hawk's retreat, starting at Soldiers' Grove on July 30, 1896....

"When Prof. Thwaites' party reached Battle Island, the first meeting was held, with thirty present. Next year more came, and now the well-organized society's annual gathering is an occasion for thousands to visit the historic spot....The assembly takes up Chautauqua work, and also induces as many state organizations as possible, of different kinds, to hold anniversary or special day exercises."

A 1902 flier inside the folder lists the officers of the Battle Island Assembly: president E. Cilley of Red Mound, treasurer A. Tullock of Victory, and secretary C.V. Porter of Viroqua. C.V. Porter was one of the local historians who went with Thwaites in 1896 along the path now called the Black Hawk Trail. Porter also erected the stone markers that still mark the trail.

What did people do at these assemblies? At the 1902 session, which lasted for nine days, visitors could listen to lectures, readings, and sermons, and enjoy live music and dancing. Lecture topics included "Purity in the Home, the School, and the Nation", "What to Tell Your Children" (for women only), and "Reasons Why Young Men Go Wrong". In an era before radio, television, and the internet, this was real entertainment.

The yearly assembly seems to have had a short life. In the file is a ledger book filled with receipts and expenses, lists of members, and C.V. Porter's minutes, which end in 1904. Nothing else in the file dates past that year. But the Black Hawk Trail through Vernon County remains to this day, and you can follow along it. A brochure with a map is available at the museum or at any of the markers, and can also be downloaded from our website, vernoncountyhistory.org.

Remember that the next meeting of the genealogy class will be Thursday, August 9, at 10AM, at the museum. Guest teacher Blaine Hedberg will speak about Norwegian genealogy. And the next day, Friday, August 10, will be the second annual Pork Chop Dinner on the lawn of the Sherry-Butt House, from 4 to 7PM.