



# THE COLUMNS

Newsletter of the Pepin County Historical Society

Vol. XXXI, No. 3

Affiliate of the Wisconsin Historical Society

Sept., 2017

Greetings,

Since our last newsletter, we lost one of the pillars at the Old Courthouse Museum and Pepin County Historical Society with the death of Vera Slabey. The courthouse was lucky to have Vera and her husband, Richard, and all the other charter members of PCHS fighting for the building's very existence. Without them our great history museum would not be. Over the years I enjoyed talking to Vera and hearing about her life. She impressed me with her wonderful storytelling and each story was full of interesting information. With all her many handwritten notes, signs, instructions, "Today is History" newspaper columns, etc., etc., her presence is still felt at the museum. Thank you, Vera, for your help and guidance. It is a pleasure to have known you. May you rest in peace.

The museum has been fortunate to have had Mike Schoup as intern again this year. He had a busy season at the museum and in his personal life with the birth of his son, Samuel, this summer. Congratulations, Mike and Sarah!!

Our Autumn Education Event will be Sunday, October 15. PCHS member, Lee Grippen, will be our featured speaker. Everyone is invited.

We have a few more Saturdays remaining for this season at the museum, so please do come and visit and bring your friends and family. It truly is such an important part of the history of Pepin County and Durand..

May God Bless you all.

President, Kim Wagenbach

The Old Courthouse Museum and 1895 Jail is open 11am to 4pm Thursday through Sunday Memorial Day to Labor Day ... or ... **open by appointment anytime year round.** Call 715-672-5423 to schedule a time and date.

## *PCHS Autumn Education Event*

### **"Dream Trip to Norway"**

Presented by **Lee Grippen**

**2 PM – Sunday, October 15**

Durand Jr-Sr High School Cafeteria

Lee Grippen, formerly of Durand, will be the featured speaker at the PCHS Autumn Education Event scheduled for 2pm on Sunday, October 15 in the Durand Junior-Senior High School Cafeteria. Lee's presentation will feature a photographic travelogue of his "Dream Trip to Norway."

Lee and Gayle Grippen hosted more than a dozen exchange students in their home in Caledonia, MN over the years. Thirteen of those students surprised Lee with a free all expense paid trip to Norway for his 70th birthday. The students and their families hosted Lee with many parties and outings to create the trip of a lifetime for Lee.

Lee and his wife volunteered with the YFU (Youth For Understanding) high school exchange program for 43 years and placed almost 500 students from around the world in homes around the tri-state area.

Lee, who was born and raised in Durand, is a retired teacher in the Caledonia, MN school system where he taught for 35 years. He has been substitute teaching in seven area schools since his retirement in 2000.

This presentation is free and open to the public.

## **MUSEUM & SOCIETY NEWS**

Steps were made toward developing a new agricultural exhibit and will continue through the coming months. A scale model dairy barn built by PCHS member Bernard Brantner now sets in the Tool Room, which will be remodeled to hold the future ag display.

The PCHS board has approved maintenance and/or replacement of outdoor signs promoting the museum. The two signs on the front lawn will be cleaned and protected and a new sign will replace the 4'x8' sign which stands in front of the City of Durand pump house at Tarrant Park and next to a large diorama featuring the Old Courthouse Museum. PCHS member William D. Hoeser, who created the diorama and produced all the signs involved in the project, will do the work.

## Tribute to Vera!

Vera and Richard Slabey will always be remembered as the founders of the Pepin County Historical Society. Many others were involved in saving the old Pepin County courthouse back in 1984, but Dick and Vera spearheaded the successful effort to save the building and to create and develop the Old Courthouse Museum and Jail. They committed large amounts of time and energy during the first 20+ years of PCHS and the museum.

Dick, as PCHS President, paid attention to society organizational activities and worked with building owner Pepin County on maintenance issues. Vera focused her energies toward the making of a good museum. They both attended dozens of workshops, meetings, conferences, and seminars to educate themselves in developing and managing a history museum. They shared their new found knowledge with volunteers, established work plans for accessioning and care of artifacts, set the groundwork for development of exhibits and displays, initiated regular educational events, and much more.

The residents of Pepin County are lucky to have had Dick and Vera in the "right place at the right time." This edition of "The Columns" is devoted to recognizing the remarkable focus, dedication, hard work and achievements of Vera Slabey.

### **Pepin County Historical Society**

Officers: President: Kim Wagenbach  
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Editor: Terry J. Mesch

## Memorials Received:

For:	From:
Vera Slabey	Lee Grippen Dave / Pat Jankoski Jean / Don Kannel Joyce Haigh

According to her obituary:

"Elvera Ann Slabey, age 91, of Durand, passed away July 28, 2017 at her home.

"Vera was born in Edina, MN on February 22, 1926 to Sylvester and Eva (Motzko) Fautsch. She graduated from Southwest High School, then worked for the Dayton Co. and Billman Mortuary. On August 31, 1949, she married Richard F. Slabey.

"Music was always Vera's passion and while raising her four children, she also taught countless others the joys of playing the piano. She played many recitals in the area over the years and was an organist at Faith Lutheran Church. After her children were grown she started a program called Music Involvement to bring Music Therapy to geriatric patients in hospitals and nursing homes in Minnesota and Wisconsin. She was also instrumental in bringing a Music Therapy program to the University of Wisconsin in Eau Claire and wrote and published three books on Geriatric Music Therapy that are still a part of teaching programs all over the world.

"Vera and Richard were charter members of Faith Lutheran Church in Durand, helped start Community Arts in Durand and were founding members of the Pepin County Historical Society to preserve the last remaining wood-framed courthouse in Wisconsin."



Vera (center left facing camera) in her element sharing her knowledge of Pepin County history with fifth graders from the Durand School District visiting the museum for Law Day. (circa 2002)



Vera Slabey “having at it” with bucket and sponge in preparation for the very first Opening Day of the Old Courthouse Museum in 1985. Much has changed in the museum since then, but Vera’s influence resonates in every room through the guidance she provided in gathering and preserving artifacts, research, photographs and manuscripts.

### Remembering Vera

Numerous people have shared memories of Vera, including long-time volunteer Irma Bauer of Durand, who said, “When the courthouse offices moved to the newly remodeled hospital building, there were rumors that the old wooden structure on Washington Square might be demolished. A group headed by Dick [and Vera] Slabey was successful in saving the building and formed the Pepin County Historical Society.

“The Durand Women’s Club was happy to move their collection to the old courthouse building, which then came to be called ‘The Old Courthouse Museum.’ Vera became the Director and was very dedicated to the museum and spent a lot of time there. She made the newsletters 3 or 4 times a year, made posters, put new posters out before each Spring opening, checked the temperature and made sure the furnace was working every day during heating season, checked the mouse traps, planned for events, speakers, new displays, etc. I think her Martha Peck display was her favorite.

“Thanks to Vera, the Chippewa Valley Museum in Eau Claire in the early 1990s selected the Old Courthouse Museum to be a part of a mentoring program to help with volunteer training for maintaining, cleaning and storing collections and developing exhibit ideas. Vera took our crew to Eau

Claire several times and some of their people came to Durand a few times to help us with exhibits. We were supposed to commit to 500 hours and we actually documented 600 hours. Our museum received \$2000 for this and ... a lot of special boxes and acid free paper for storing clothes.”

Dave and Pat Jankoski from Stanley, Wisconsin, sent a note saying: “We often compared notes with the Slabey’s as we were both developing museums in Stanley and Durand at the same time. Nice folks who contributed much to their community.”

Vera’s son, Steve, in his eulogy to his mother, said, “Vera Slabey was a...multi-faceted, multi-talented, force-to-be-reckoned-with piece of work. She played her piano every day until she died. ... She was a gifted artist.... She wrote profusely.... She and dad designed the home she died in after 52 years. She [discovered] their property could be placed in the National Registry of Mountains as it was a thousand feet above sea level. And so it came to be named Mount Matthew, which means ‘gift from God.’ She loved to travel with her family and...proved to be a formidable Crappie slayer.

“When the Durand Drum and Bugle Choir needed a Director, she stepped up and served for several years. When the University of Wisconsin asked, she served on the Citizen’s Advisory Council. When it was time to build this church [Faith Lutheran Church in Durand], she and dad decided to donate the land that we worship on today.

...

“When Tal Nicholas called one day and asked, “Did you hear they’re going to tear down the old courthouse?”, she and dad spearheaded the formation of the Pepin County Historical Society to preserve the oldest wood-framed courthouse in Wisconsin. She then named, wrote and edited ‘The Columns,’ a newsletter about the Historical Society up until a few years ago.

“One day she decided that elderly patients in hospitals and nursing homes could benefit from Music Therapy and so her program called Music Involvement was born. She traveled to hospitals and nursing homes throughout Wisconsin and Minnesota, sharing the gift and healing powers of music with thousands of geriatric patients with the idea of making their last days on earth more pleasant. She wrote three books on the subject of Geriatric Music Therapy that are still in use as teaching curricula all over the world.

“And who could forget the Ghost of Mount Matthew? For years, she would appear at the bottom of our driveway sitting on the tailgate of our old green Jeep wagon, carved pumpkin lantern at her side, passing out Halloween candy to those youngsters brave enough to approach the crazy lady under that sheet.

“I could go on, but..., I’m sure you’re getting the idea. When something needed to happen, Vera just made it happen.”



**Pepin County Historical Society**  
**OLD COURTHOUSE MUSEUM**  
Washington Square  
315 W. Madison St.  
Durand, WI 54736



Pepin County Courthouse at Durand, Wis. lithograph from "Illustrated Historical Atlas of Buffalo and Pepin Counties - 1878"

Find us on the Internet!  
[www.oldpepincountycourthouse.org](http://www.oldpepincountycourthouse.org)

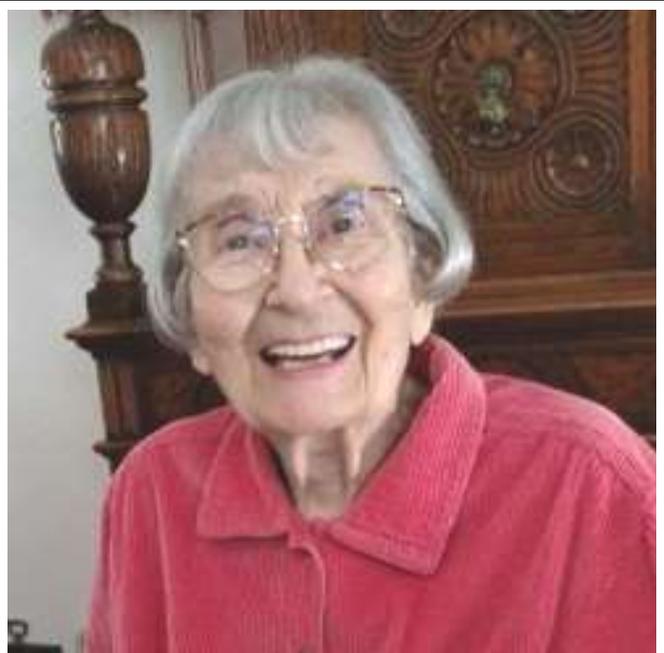
***Pass this newsletter on  
to a friend & encourage  
him/her to join PCHS!***

NAME \_\_\_\_\_  
STREET \_\_\_\_\_  
CITY \_\_\_\_\_  
STATE/ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

**MEMBERSHIPS:**

- \_\_\_ \$8 Individual
- \_\_\_ \$12 Family
- \_\_\_ \$25 Friends of Museum
- \_\_\_ \$25 Business/Professional
- \_\_\_ \$50 Contributing
- \_\_\_ \$100 Sponsor
- \_\_\_ \$1000 Lifetime

And, here's my extra donation of \$ \_\_\_\_\_



Elvera Slabey was a charter member of the Pepin County Historical Society and the first Director of the Old Courthouse Museum, a position she held from 1984 to 2004. Vera's work is evident throughout the museum today and her tireless efforts preserving the history and traditions of Pepin County continue to be an inspiration to those of us now walking in her footsteps. See inside this newsletter for more about this remarkable woman.