

MEEKER MEMORIES

SUMMER 2025

MEEKER COUNTY
MUSEUM
QUARTERLY
NEWSLETTER



Olson's Grocery and Hotel, 1926



Meeker County Museum at the G.A.R. Hall

Sharing Our Stories Since 1885

308 N Marshall Ave
Litchfield, MN 55355
320-693-8911

www.meekercomuseum.org

Tuesday-Friday 10:00-4:00
Saturday 12:00-4:00
Closed major holidays

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308 N Marshall Ave
Litchfield, MN 55355

Admission

Adults - \$3

Members & Children Under 12 - FREE

Free admission to view the G.A.R. Hall

Board of Directors

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Staff

Danelle Erickson - Executive Director
director@meekercomuseum.org

Sandy Johnson - Research Librarian
staff@meekercomuseum.org

July

4-5 **Museum and G.A.R. Hall Closed**—Happy July 4th!

10 **Civil War Roundtable—The Confederate Raid on St. Albans, Vermont** presented by Darryl Sannes. Free for Roundtable Members; \$3/general admission

12 **Museum open early during Watercade and Art in the Park.** Open 10:00-4:00

31 **Meeker County Fair**

August

1-3 **Meeker County Fair** Stop by our booth in Commercial Building #3 and say "hi!"

14 **Civil War Roundtable—Civil War Re-Enactor** presented by Bruce Nelson 1:30. Free for Roundtable Members; \$3/general admission

September

11 **Civil War Roundtable—A Tale of Two Confederate Diaries** presented by Mary Soroko. 1:30. Free for Roundtable Members; \$3/general admission

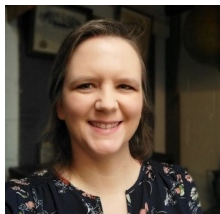
Thank you to our local media outlets for supporting local history.

KLFD's Newsmaker—first Thursday
Litchfield Rail articles—2nd and 4th issues each month

Director's Notes

Collection Spotlight

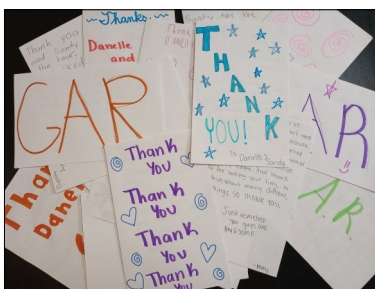
Danelle Erickson Executive Director



Summer is always an exciting time at the Museum. With kids out of school, tourists out and about, and people returning to the area to visit family and friends. And often, they include a visit to the Museum and G.A.R. Hall.

Just last weekend, we had an out-of-state visitor return to Litchfield. He and his sisters had been born in town and he was thrilled to find their birth announcements in the newspapers. Another family was staying at a local campground, and their young son was very interested in the Civil War, so included a visit in their Saturday plans.

Speaking of past visitors, I want to thank all of our local school groups who toured the Museum this past spring. We welcomed classes from ACGC, Dassel-Cokato, Kimball, and Litchfield with grades third through seventh. We always love the energy and curiosity the students bring to the museum!



Fieldtrip "thank you" cards



This past month, we added to our microfilm holdings at the Museum! The microfilm project has been financed in part with funds provided by the State of Minnesota from the Arts and Cultural Heritage Fund through the Minnesota Historical Society. The new microfilm reels include newspapers from Eden Valley, Grove City, Watkins, and Litchfield. The papers can be viewed at the Museum during our regular hours.

One of the things we enjoy with our school tours is to get their brains thinking about history and to share some stories with the kids.

When we come to the weaving and spinning display, we often pause and ask them, "What's the oldest thing in your house? (And you can't say your parents.)" The answers range from clocks, toys, quilts, even the house itself. We then give them the "homework" of figuring out what the oldest thing is AND to see if there are any stories about who owned it or where it came from.



1812 spinning wheel

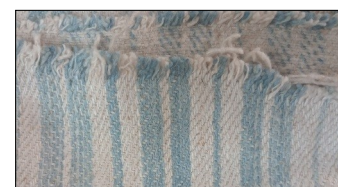
From there, we tell the story of one of the Museum's oldest items, the "life saving spinning wheel." If you don't know the story, you will have to come to the Museum and read it for yourself.



Ragnild Danielson

When we are done telling the wheel's story, it's fun to point out some other connections around the museum. We tell them the spinning wheel was brought from Norway, across the ocean, to Minnesota by Ragnild Danielson whose picture we had looked at earlier. Not only that, but we have a piece of fabric on display that was made by Ragnild from materials spun on the same spinning wheel.

Now it's your turn. What's the oldest thing you have in your house and does it have a story? If so, be sure to write it down so it doesn't get forgotten!



Close-up of fabric made by Ragnild and her daughter Helen (Danielson) Evenson.



New* and Returning Members April–June 2025

Allen Ahlbrecht
American Legion Post 104
Anderson Chemical Company*
Auggie Anderson
Darwin Monument
Lynne Gelston
Doug Meeker
Trina Ness
Stacy and Derek Penk
Stockmen's Greenhouse
Roberta Swenson

Business and Nonprofit Members



American Legion Post 104



Conway, Deuth &
Schiesing, PLLP

Litchfield Downtown Council



Litchfield Opera House



Litchfield Rotary



VFW Post 2818



Financial Donations April–June 2025

Acton Township
Allen Ahlbrecht
American Legion Post 104
Auggie Anderson
Gary Blessman
Danielson Township
Carolyn French
Greenleaf Township
Grove Bank
Harvey Township
Sandra Johnson
Don and Connie Lies
Litchfield Township
Manannah Township
Doug Meeker
Don Miller

Dennis & Nina Rutledge
William Saunders
Bob and Beth Schnell
Larry Sharpe
Swede Grove Township

In Memory of Darlene
Miller
John Miller Family

In Memory of Douglas
Whitaker
Dan Whitaker
Karel Whitaker
Stephen Whitaker

Artifact Donations April–June 2025

Pam Anderson
Elaine Lenhard
Brenda Rick

Richard Thomas
Elaine Yungk

If you are considering donating items to the
Museum, please contact us beforehand. Thanks!

Help share local history!

- Bring someone to the museum
- Forward our monthly email or share your newsletter with someone
- Organize a group tour or talk to us about group presentations
- Comment on and share our Facebook posts

A Tale of Three Letters

1921 envelope to Chester Olson, Litchfield

Continuing our series featuring letters from the Meeker County Historical Society archives.

In the Museum's archives, we have several collections of letters, some of which include dozens of correspondences. But there are some occasions where we only have a single letter. Obviously, the more letters there are, the more we can learn about the people involved, but it can be an intriguing puzzle to see what can be pieced together from one letter and a bit of research. Quite often, one bit of information leads to another and another and another. Here are three examples.

In 1998, Ron Dingmann was doing some renovation work on the building he owned on the northwest corner of East 3rd Street and Marshall Avenue in Litchfield. (Today, this location is part of the library's parking lot.) During the renovation, Dingmann came across a letter and envelope behind a doorframe. The letter was written in 1921 and was from Bessie Cummings of Elcho, Wisconsin, to Chester Olson of Litchfield.

Bessie's letter was in response to one she had received from Chester, but the two didn't actually know each other. The letter opens with Bessie writing that she was surprised to receive the letter and wondered why Chester wanted to know about her, but didn't share much about himself. She then told him she was fourteen years old, in the seventh grade, was five feet, six inches tall, and weighed 137 pounds. Her family lived on a farm and her school teacher

was 40 years old and unmarried. The letter was signed, "Your unknown friend, Miss Bessie Cummings."

While this letter might raise some eyebrows today, it turns out Chester was the same age as Bessie. Perhaps his first letter was connected to a class project or a type of pen pal. This is supported when Bessie wrote, "Do you make it a practice to write to all the children[?]"

Why did Chester write in the first place? Did he and Bessie become regular correspondents, or were these the only letters exchanged? How did the letter get behind the doorframe? Was Chester looking to hide it, or did it literally fall through the cracks?

While there is certainly a lot we don't know, we have been able to piece together some details about Bessie and Chester.

Bessie lived her whole life in Wisconsin and later worked as a public school teacher. She remained single and died in 1947 in Wisconsin.

As for Chester, he was born in Cosmos and was the son of William and Annie Olson. For several years, William was the owner of the St. Cloud Hotel in Litchfield. A few years before Chester wrote to Bessie, the Olsons made changes to the hotel, adding a grocery store to the



Chester Olson,
1918



William Olson standing in front of his
grocery store and hotel, 1926

front. The Olson family lived above the store which is where Dingmann found the letter years later.

William Olson later had a grocery store in Atwater, and Chester worked for him. Chester would later move to Minneapolis and then Walker, Minnesota, where he died in 1974. Chester never married and is buried in the Litchfield Cemetery.

Our second letter was written on June 1, 1902, by Andrew E. Anderson of Minneapolis to his friend Oscar Lundquist in Starbuck, Minnesota. He wrote that the school year was over, leaving time for picnics. He had attended a picnic at Lake Harriet that had been a "howling success."



Not everyone was excited about the arrangements, however, and a Mr. Wallin decided to picnic by himself at Minnehaha. A.E. wished him well.

It isn't until the second half of the letter that we find mention of Meeker County. A.E. wrote that his brother was arriving from Montana the following day and together they were traveling to Litchfield for the high school graduation of their sister. From there, he planned to travel to Willmar and set up a class. If there was enough time, he would pay a visit to Oscar.

While this might not seem like a lot of details, there are enough clues to piece together more about A.E. He was born in 1872 in Ellsworth Township to Nels and Anne Anderson. He later moved to Minneapolis, where he attended the Northwestern Conservatory of Music, becoming a teacher of mandolin and guitar.

It was mandolin and guitar classes he hoped to set up in Willmar, but something must have changed his mind as just a few days later, the *Litchfield*



Litchfield Mandolin Club, unknown date

Saturday Review announced A.E. would be offering classes in Litchfield starting mid-June. Sadly, this was the only mention of the lessons we found in the newspapers and don't know if A.E. was successful in gaining any students. However, a photo from around this period shows the Litchfield Mandolin Club. Whether or not A.E. played a part in the club is yet uncertain, but it certainly shows that the *Review* was right when it wrote, "The popularity of these instruments is gaining rapidly."

Anderson continued his career in music, giving lessons and working as a church choir director. He lived in Minneapolis, Duluth, and Chicago. While in Chicago, he was a lodger with Bernice Wallin and her brother Roy. Perhaps Roy was the same Mr. Wallin who was unhappy with the picnic arrangements mentioned in the letter. A.E. and Bernice married in 1911. A few years later, the couple and their growing family moved to Minneapolis where A.E. died in 1972. His funeral and burial were in Litchfield.

The last letter we are looking at was written in 1916 from Etta Branham of Centuria, Wisconsin, to Edwin Brooks of Litchfield. Brooks was the commander of Litchfield's G.A.R. Post at the time.

Etta's grandfather had suffered an accident, and Etta was writing to Mr. Brooks to give him an update, but also to share some of her frustrations. Etta reports that she had written to Riley McGannon regarding what could be done for her grandfather and received a "very unsatisfactory reply." Etta's grandfather had been in the hospital following his accident, and his recovery was slow. McGannon wrote that the "lodge" thought her grandfather should have gone to the veterans' home, not the hospital.

For her part, Etta was not impressed with the "lodge" and was "thoroughly [sic] convinced all lodges are nothing but a graft" or part of some shady dealings. Despite her complaints, Etta closes her letter with good tidings.

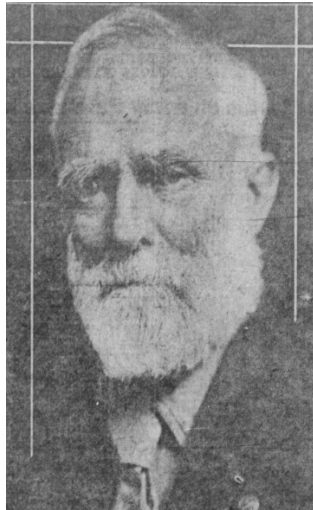
A bit more digging into the lives of Etta and her grandfather reveals some interesting stories. At the time of the letter, Etta was in her late twenties. She was born in Meeker County and was the daughter of Winfield Scott and Julie (McDowell) Branham. Prior to the letter, Etta worked as a nurse, which might explain why she was invested in her grandfather's care.

Around 1909, it appears Etta married capitalist Dwight Baldwin of Minneapolis. They had met when Etta cared for his dying wife and married

when he was 72 and she was 22. According to the Twin Cities newspapers, shortly after their wedding, they embarked on a global honeymoon. However, about eighteen months later, the *Star Tribune* reported that nurse Etta Branham was suing Baldwin for the \$1,000 he had promised her in exchange for accompanying him on his world tour. No mention was made of them being married and Etta was awarded \$1,025. Etta later married Perry Schiebel and they had two children. She died in 1966 in Centuria, Wisconsin.

Etta's grandfather was William Branham, a man well known in Meeker County. He had the distinction of having served in both the Mexican-American War and the U.S. Civil War. Between the two wars, in 1857, he left his home state of Indiana and settled in Meeker County along with his parents Jesse Sr. and Mary Branham and his brothers.

When the US-Dakota War of 1862 began, William was part of the defense of Forest City. He



William Branham,
from 1914 *Star Tribune* article

would later enlist in the 2nd Minnesota Cavalry and was wounded during the Sully's Expedition against the Dakota.

After the war, he returned to Meeker County where he and his wife Martha raised six children, including Etta's father. Even into his eighties, Branham "was as spry as a man of forty" and was still chopping wood and carrying water. Sadly for Branham, in June 1916, he suffered the accident Etta wrote about. While it might sound comedic today, Branham's injury was sustained when he slipped on a banana peel on a Litchfield sidewalk, falling and breaking his hip.

(Sometimes in the old newspapers it can be hard for the modern reader to know if the paper is being serious or a bit tongue-in-cheek, but the banana peel was reported by all three of Litchfield's newspapers and appears to be fact.)

Branham never fully recovered from his fall. He was eventually able to leave the hospital and moved to Wisconsin to be near his son and his family, including Etta. Branham was a member of the Litchfield G.A.R. and this might have been the "lodge" Etta was seeking help from in her letter, or possibly another organization such as the Masons. William Branham died in Wisconsin in April 1917. His remains were brought back to Litchfield for burial.

Meeker County Museum at the G.A.R. Hall Membership

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Phone Number: _____

Email _____

Annual Museum Membership

- ☐ Single \$25
- ☐ Family \$40
- ☐ Senior Single \$20
- ☐ Senior Family \$35

☐ I'd like to make an additional donation \$ _____

Annual Litchfield Civil War Roundtable Membership

- ☐ Single \$30
- ☐ Family \$40

Membership Matters!

Your membership to the Meeker County Museum not only gives you some great benefits, including free/reduced admission and a subscription to *Meeker Memories*, but you are also supporting the ongoing work at the Museum. **Thank you!**

Members can find your renewal date on your mailing label.

Meeker County Historical Society, 308 N Marshall Avenue, Litchfield, MN 55355

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Litchfield, MN 55355

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