

MEEKER MEMORIES

FALL 2025

MEEKER COUNTY
MUSEUM
QUARTERLY
NEWSLETTER



Museum Unit No 1, including Litchfield's Ivan Dart



**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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HOME"**



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

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

Jessica Bondhus

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Dean Urdahl

Jessica VanLanduyt

Staff

Danelle Erickson - Executive Director
director@meekercomuseum.org

Sandy Johnson - Research Librarian
staff@meekercomuseum.org

October

- 9 **Civil War Roundtable—From the Second Minnesota, Personal Reflections of a Private Soldier** presented by Danelle Erickson. 1:30. Free for Roundtable Members; \$3/general admission

November

- 13 **Civil War Roundtable—Colvill Smiled: The Legend of the 1st Minnesota Volunteer Regiment at Gettysburg**, with author Steve Hoffbeck
1:30. Free for Roundtable Members; \$3/general admission
- 27-29 **Museum closed for Thanksgiving Holiday**

December

- 4 **Meeker County Historical Society Annual Meeting.**
More details to come.
- 11 **No Civil War Roundtable**
Closed for Christmas Holiday
December 24—January 1

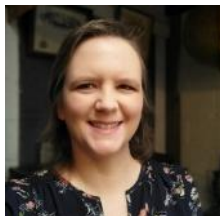
Thank you to our local media outlets for supporting local history.

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

Director's Notes

Collection Spotlight

Danelle Erickson Executive Director



When we think about history, we obviously think about the past. But there is a flip side to that – the Future of History.

The Future of History is a big part of what we do at the Meeker County Museum. Besides sharing through exhibits and events, we also look to preserve and protect our history for the future.

As we wrap up 2025 and head into the new year, the Museum will be facing some challenges. Typically our appropriation from Meeker County has covered around 42% of our annual

budget of \$65,000. But with the county facing their own financial obstacles, the county support in 2026 will cover only about 23% of our budget.

We are looking to raise \$20,000 by the end of this year. This will wrap up our annual expenses and give us a great start as we head into 2026. Donations can be made in person, by mail, or online at meekercomuseum.org/donate. Please don't hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions.

Together, we can save the Future of History!



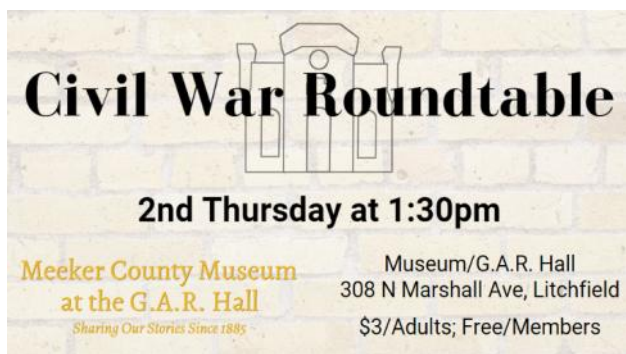
Did you know the Museum has a regular column in the *Litchfield Rail*? The same articles are also shared on our website's blog. Here's a recent excerpt.

This chair belonged to Dr. George E Sherwood. He graduated from the University of Minnesota Medical School in 1894 and came to Meeker County later that year. In 1898, he established the county's first hospital in Dassel. He relocated to Kimball after a few years, but stayed connected with Meeker County.

Dr. Sherwood was also well-traveled and could speak three foreign languages and understand two more. He often shared home movies of his travels.

Among all of his accomplishments and traits, one might also assume that Dr. Sherwood was well-dressed. That's because Sherwood's chair at the museum is a valet chair. Most valet chairs offer a place to sit and a convenient place to hold your suitcoat. However, this chair's original label explains some of its extra features. First, it can press one's trousers. The chair back is made of two wood panels, joined by a hinge. The user simply lines up the pant seams, places the pant legs between the panels, and closes the panels tightly together for a time. Presto! We do have to admit, while this sounds convenient, we at the museum haven't actually tried it and can't help wonder if today's iron would have a better result.

The deluxe valet chair also includes a shoe shine kit in the front drawer with equipment that fastens to the drawer. For added convenience, when the work is complete, the drawer includes a "Kept Clean Receptacle." With a quick turn of the button, the bottom of the drawer drops away for easy cleaning.





New* and Returning Members July–September 2025

Allen Co Public Library
Margaret Baker
Richard and Elizabeth
Carlson
Mindy Desens
Pamela Dille
Jerome Johnson and
Anita Robeson
Chuck Lavallee
Tim Lundstrom

Beverly Meyer and
David Johnson
David and Karen Miley*
Gerry Moen
Chris & Sarah Morris
Bruce & Anita Nelson
Therese O'Fallon
Dave and Jan Pease
Jim & Judy Remington*
Robert Rogers

continued in next column

Financial Donations July–September 2025

Gary Blessman
Lee and Audrey Hollaar
Jerome Johnson
Anita Robeson
Tim Lundstrom
Meeker County
Beverly Meyer and David
Johnson

David and Karen Miley
Olson Family Trust
Dave and Jan Pease
Jim and Judy Remington
Barbara Sando
Christine Swanson
Richard Thomas
Dean and Karen Urdahl

Artifact Donations July–September 2025

Candace Barrick
Kathy Cook
Wendy Halverson
Philip Johnson
Ronald Keller

David Miley
Scott Olson
Karen Knutsen Quinn
Shirley Schoonover
Rich Street

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

New* and Returning Members *Continued*

Bruce Simonson*
Wanda Urdahl
Hugh and Carol Wagner

Tom & Candy Westrum
Heather Woodlee
Ken & Mary Zachman

Business and Nonprofit Members



American Legion Post 104



Conway, Deuth &
Schiesing, PLLP

Litchfield
Downtown
Council



Litchfield Opera House



Litchfield Rotary



VFW Post 2818



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

Letters Home

1965 letter from Vietnam; ruins of French city of Fismes after WWI

We are continuing our series of letters found in the Museum's collection. The two letters in this issue were written by soldiers to their loved ones back in Meeker County. Most personal letters aren't typically read by a wide audience, but the recipients shared the letters with the local newspapers and they were published for all to read.

Ivan Dart

Ivan "Bill" Dart was born in Litchfield in 1897 to Charles Sr. and Nellie Dart. After graduating from Litchfield High School, he attended the University of Minnesota. In June 1917, Dart enlisted in the Army and was initially part of Base Hospital No. 26, a hospital unit made up largely of U of M medical students. In June 1918, Dart and his unit crossed the ocean to England and then on to France. At some time during his service, Dart became part of the Museum Photographic Unit. The purpose of this new unit was to document medical procedures and conditions. These images, and even motions pictures, would be used to improve wartime medicine in the future.

After the war ended in November 1918, Dart and his unit remained in France. When he received some free time in March 1919, Dart grabbed his camera and went to explore the French countryside alongside some of the other men in his unit.

Later, he sent a lengthy letter home about what he saw along with some photos. The letter was published in the *Litchfield News Ledger* on



Ivan "Bill" Dart

April 24, 1919. Unfortunately for the readers at the time, photos were rare in newspapers and therefore were not included. Fortunately for us today, Dart's relatives recently donated a book with some of the very photos Dart mentions in his letter.

One of the first places the men visited was in the city of Reims where they posed in front of the famous Reims cathedral that had been bombed repeatedly during the war. As for the rest of Reims, "there isn't a house in that town that has not been hit and most of them are absolutely demolished." Accommodations were limited, but the men finally found a hotel for the night. There was no glass on the windows and a large hole over the men's heads, but there were beds and blankets, and the men knew it could be worse.

As the men continued their tour, they passed by hillsides dotted with graves marked by the helmets of the different armies. They also met some German prisoners of war working in the area. Then they came across some abandoned grenades. Dart decided to give a few of them a try, which his fellow travelers



Reims Cathedral



Playing with grenades. One of Dart's group is crouching down behind the wall.

weren't so sure about. "You can see in the picture what a fuss they kick up." This came to a quick end when some of the shrapnel began falling on the men and their camera.

The men later walked by a massive ammunition dump made up of German and French artillery. What happened next Dart described as "one of the most exciting incidents in our young lives." They were about a block away from the ammunition when they heard a massive explosion. "We didn't stop to look

around for we all knew what it was." They took off running. When they reached a safe distance, they turned around to view a massive black cloud of



ammunition explosion smoke and 300-foot tall flames.

The men watched in awe until Dart "remembered that I was a would-be photographer" and he quickly took some pictures. When shrapnel and machine gun shells started falling on the men, they thought it was time for them to leave. But just down the road, the men were in for another surprise. There was a caravan of vehicles, unable to advance because of the explosion. Sitting in one of the cars was none other than US President Wilson. Dart declared his "picture bug" as being "pretty well established" and got within a few feet of the president's car. He waited to see if Wilson would get out of the car, but decided to take a photo through the windows. Overall, Dart was pretty happy with the results.



President Woodrow Wilson seated in the back of the car.

Dart closed his letter with best wishes to everyone, and wrote that all indications were he would be home by June at



Museum Unit #1
Dart is the fourth from the left.

the latest. Things didn't move quite as quickly as Dart had hoped. The ship transporting Dart and other members of the Museum Unit arrived in the United States on July 3, 1919, and Dart was back in Litchfield a few weeks later.

Dart married Elsa Wollthan and they had two children. For a time, the family lived in New Jersey, but later returned to Minnesota, living in the metro area. He would go on to be vice president of the printing company Brown & Bigelow in St. Paul which is still in existence today. Ivan "Bill" Dart died in 1977 at the age of 79.

Merle Hanson

On September 30, 1965, *The Independent Review* published a letter that was originally sent from Vietnam. The letter was addressed to "My Dear Son" and signed "Your Dad." While the readers of the day might not have known who wrote the letter, at the Museum we know it was written by Merle Hanson. A few years ago, Hanson visited the Meeker County Museum. He no longer had a copy of the letter and we helped him find it in our newspaper archive.

At the time of the letter, Hanson's five-year-old son was struggling to understand why his dad was so far away. It was a time in history when many US citizens were angry and/or confused about America's involvement in Vietnam. Perhaps that's why the Hansons agreed to share their personal letter with a larger audience.

Hanson wrote that he remembered when he had been a young boy during World War II and the confusion he felt when his uncle and brother went off to war.

Using words his young son would understand and yet not scare him, Hanson wrote in a simple and straightforward manner. "Just think of what it would be like if some bad men came into our house and took our food, money and anything else they might want. Well, son, this is what has happened in Viet Nam."

He also wrote about the children he was seeing, those who were hurt or sick and didn't have a place to sleep. "As I walk down the roads and through the jungle and see how bad it is for all the little kids I think of you son, and I say a little prayer thanking God that you are home in a great country and safe."

Hanson concluded the letter with thoughts probably shared by many wartime parents. He told his son that he loved him and to "keep up the



Merle Hanson, 1968.
Shared by the
Hanson family

good job" of taking care of his mom and little sisters.

Hanson had a long military career. He enlisted in the Minnesota National Guard while still in high school and was called to active duty in 1950. He later reenlisted, joining the army in 1961. He was sent to Vietnam twice and would remain in the army until his retirement in 1980. Merle Hanson passed away in Litchfield in October 2024, having returned to his hometown after several years away.

Sources

Letters from *Litchfield News Ledger* and *The Independent Review*.

The World War I Scrapbook of Ivan H, "Bill" Dart, reproduced and donated by the Dart family.

THANK YOU to the Greater Litchfield Opera House Association and their in kind donation of printing this publication.

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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