

MEEKER MEMORIES

SUMMER 2023

MEEKER COUNTY
MUSEUM
QUARTERLY
NEWSLETTER



The mission of the Meeker County Historical Society is to enhance and preserve the Meeker County Museum, Civil War Building Complex, and its growing collection of artifacts of local historical and genealogical significance. We also serve to provide educational programming and other means for dissemination of local historical and genealogical information for present and future generations.



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

Sharing Our Stories Since 1885

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FAMILIES"*



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

308 N Marshall Ave
Litchfield, MN 55355
320-693-8911
www.meekercomuseum.org

Admission

Adults - \$3
Members & Children Under 12 - FREE

Board of Directors

Sid Willson (President)
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Dave Pease
Barb Penk

Staff

Danelle Erickson - Executive Director
director@meekercomuseum.org
Sandy Johnson - Research Librarian
staff@meekercomuseum.org

July

13 **Civil War Roundtable: Camp Release: Dakota Natives, MN Soldiers and Military Tribunal Initial Site**, a US-Dakota War of 1862 presentation with Gary Blessman. 1:30. Free for Roundtable Members; \$3/general admission

August

3-6 **Meeker County Fair**—Stop by our booth and say “hi!”
10 **Civil War Roundtable: Reclaiming Mni Sota: Changing the Past to Connect With the Present** with Colin Mustful. 1:30. Free for Roundtable Members; \$3/general admission
12- **Civil War Spy Mystery** One week only!
19 See page 4 for details

September

14 **Civil War Roundtable: Lincoln and the Hellgate: The Effie Afton Trial** with George Romano. 1:30. Free for Roundtable Members; \$3/general admission

Follow us on Facebook to stay up-to-date on our upcoming events or see page 7 on how you can sign up for our monthly emails “Meeker Memos”

Director's Notes

Collection Spotlight

Danelle Erickson
Executive Director



Happy Summer!

A huge "THANK YOU!" to all of our sponsors, donors, and attendees who made this year's Memorial Day Picnic a wonderful success. A special thanks to our premier sponsor, the Schnell Family, and to Terry Shaw for the great music. See below for the complete list of our sponsors and donors.

We are excited to be a part of the Family Fun Passport, presented by Explore Minnesota. The passport is free and features attractions and activities from across the state. Each spot offers a special discount. At the Museum, we are offering exclusive household admission for just \$5! Offers run through September 30. Sign-up today at exploreminnesota.com/mnfamilyfun.

This summer will also see the return of the Civil War Spy Mystery. For one week only, see if you can solve the puzzles and unlock the mystery. Free and fun for all ages. If you enjoy escape rooms or puzzle solving, you won't want to miss this interactive history mystery! August 12-August 19.

You never know where history might be hidden! These diaries and portable desk were found in an attic in northern Minnesota several years ago. The cabin once belonged to the daughter of Anthony Anderson. Anthony was the author of the diaries.

In a way, these portable writing desks were the first laptop! When opened, the desk provided a convenient writing slope, with places for ink, pens, and paper to be stored.



Anthony's diaries are from 1880-1886. While his handwriting is small and a little faded, it is very neat and fairly easy to read (especially with a magnifying glass).



Anthony writes of mostly everyday events, such as visiting with family and friends, and his job at a Litchfield store. On special days, like

Christmas, he wrote even smaller, making sure capture all of the day's events.

Anthony was dedicated to his faith, recording his prayer times and Bible reading. He also really hoped to find love—even recording when a Miss Agnes let him hold her hand! Anthony did eventually get married, marrying Eva Mills in 1891. Anthony owned some stores in Litchfield before leaving town for other retail opportunities. He died in 1941 and is buried in Litchfield.

Thank you to our Memorial Day Supporters

Premier Sponsor—The Schnell Family

Picnic Sponsors

Family and Friends of Bert Thulin and Thulin Brothers Construction

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exploreminnesota.com/mnfamilyfun



Members

New* and Returning Members April-June 2023

Auggie Anderson
Suzanne Braun
Conway, Deuth &
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Darwin Monument
Grove Bank*
Litchfield Opera House

Litchfield Rotary Club*
Gerry Moen
Jamie Phelps
Jerome Johnson and
Anita Robeson
Stockmen's Greenhouse
Mike & Kristin Welbaum



Donors

Financial Donations April-June 2023

Acton Township
Suzanne Braun
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First Presbyterian
Church
Harvey Township
Jerome Johnson and
Anita Robeson

Einar Lundin
Minnesota Daughters of
the Union Veterans of the
Civil War
Presbyterian Women
Swede Grove Township
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Business and Nonprofit Members



American Legion Post 104



Conway, Deuth &
Schiesing, PLLP



Litchfield Opera House



Litchfield Rotary



VFW Post 2818

Artifact Donations April-June 2023

Candace Barrick
Charles Luedtke

Chuck Pease
John Sanders

If you are considering donating an artifact to the Meeker County Museum, please contact us first. As exhibit space and storage is limited, all items must be from Meeker County and will be evaluated based on condition, history, and uniqueness to the current collection.

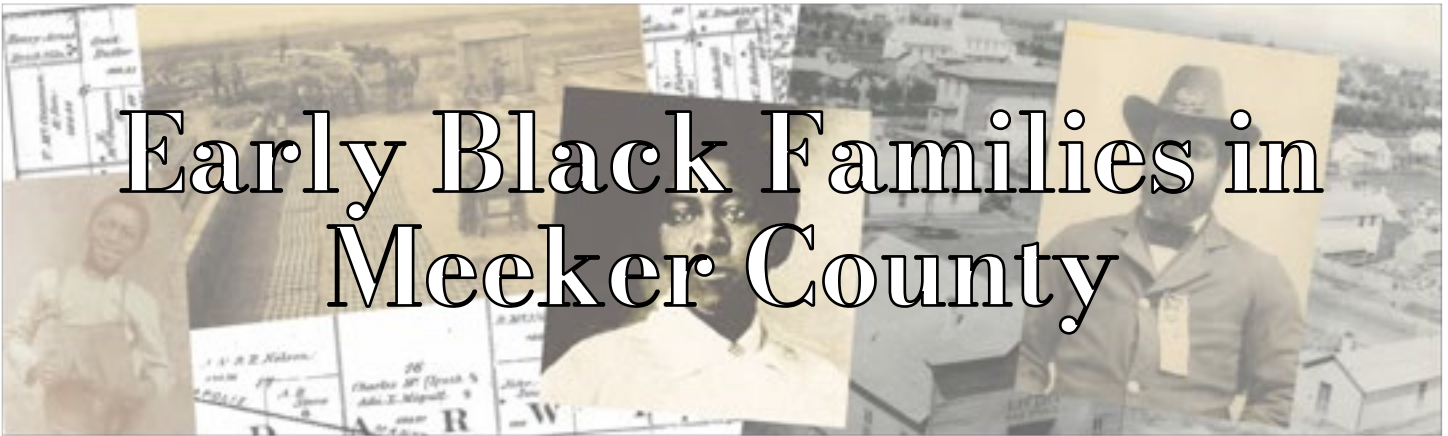
Civil War Spy Mystery
Solve the puzzles and crack the code
August 12-19, 2023
Tuesday-Friday 10-4
Saturday 12-4
Available anytime during regular hours

If you enjoy escape rooms or puzzle solving, you won't want to miss this interactive history mystery!

FREE!
This is the same spy mystery that was at the Museum last autumn!

Meeker County Museum
at the G.A.R. Hall
History Our Stories Since 1883

Early Black Families in Meeker County



Collage includes photographs of Frank Daggett Van Spence, Lulu Blair, and Albert Van Spence; photo of Henry Ames Brick Yard; 1880 map of Darwin and photo of Litchfield.

We are taking a quick break from our “Township Tales” series. Instead, we will be visiting some of the individuals featured in our Juneteenth program. We will return to the townships with stories from Harvey and Manannah Townships in our next issue.

If you’ve visited the G.A.R. Hall or are familiar with Meeker County history, you might know the name “Van Spence.” Albert Van Spence and his family called Meeker County home for over two decades. The Van Spence family were African Americans, and while they were in the minority, they weren’t the only blacks in Meeker County at the time.

From the 1880 US Federal Census, we find the largest black population in Meeker County’s first fifty-plus years. Who were they? Why did they come to Meeker County? What happened to them? Let’s find out.

Most of these early African American families came to Meeker County because of Henry Ames and his brickyard. In May 1878, the *Litchfield News Ledger* reported Ames had hired two black men to work at the brickyard northeast of Litchfield in Darwin Township. Two years later, Ames was hoping to have five or six black families working for him. When the census was recorded in June 1880, the following black individuals were listed in Darwin Township:



Henry Ames

- James and Clara Malone
- Jeremiah Vader and family
- Van Spence

James Blair (Blair was recorded as “white” in the census, this was most likely a clerical error)

These men and women had more in common than working together, in fact, they all came to Meeker County from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin!

Starting in the 1860s, Fond du Lac had a

successful brick-making factory. By 1878, production was on the decline and the factory closed three years later. It’s not too much of a stretch to imagine Van Spence and company working together, losing their jobs together, and relocating to Meeker County together.

James and Clara Malone were recorded in Meeker County only in 1880, with no other mention of them found (to this date). By 1885, the couple had returned to Fond du Lac. James was born in Alabama, where he probably had been enslaved. Clara was Native American. Later in life, the couple moved to the Stockbridge Indian Reservation.

Jeremiah “Jerry” and Lois Vader were probably well acquainted with the Malones. In fact, Jerry and Lois were the witnesses at the Malones’ wedding in Wisconsin. Jerry served in the US Army in the 1870s. By 1880, the couple had two children, Flora and John. In August 1880, the *Litchfield News Ledger* reported the death of a “little colored child whose parents reside at the brick yard.” This could have been the death of young John as he doesn’t appear with the family after 1880.

The Vader family remained in Meeker County until at least 1883 when the birth of a child was recorded in Litchfield. By 1885, however, the family had moved to Minneapolis.

The last two black families in 1880 Darwin Township were the **Blairs** and the **Van Spences**. These two families were linked by more than just circumstances—they were related! Albert Van Spence’s wife, Missouri, was the sister to James Blair.

When the 1880 census was recorded on June 3, only Albert and James were listed in Darwin Township. Their wives, Missouri and Priscilla

were still in Fond du Lac with their children. But just seven days later, Missouri Van Spence was in Meeker County, giving birth to their daughter Orah. There's a good chance Missouri's sister-in-law Priscilla joined her on her journey west.

By 1885, the Blairs had moved to Minneapolis (where they were once again neighbors with the Jerry Vader family). Occasionally, family members would visit the Van Spences in Litchfield and the local papers would remark on the return of the former residents.

James and Priscilla Blair had at least eight children. Their eldest daughter, **Lulu**, was quite an accomplished woman. Lulu was determined to graduate high school. She overcame many struggles as she attended school, including helping her widowed mother raise her siblings, add to the family's income, tend to her dying sister, and became very ill herself.



Lulu Blair, niece of Albert Van Spence

But Lulu prevailed and was one of the first black students to graduate from Minneapolis High School and did so with high honors. She then attended Tuskegee Institute in Alabama and become a teacher. She later married John Maxwell.

Around 1918, Lulu Blair Maxwell began a new career in social welfare. She would later work for the city of Minneapolis' social relief office as a social investigator. She worked in welfare for many years and was highly respected in her profession. She died in Minneapolis in 1945.

Before we conclude with the Van Spence family, a quick side note about the other African Americans in Meeker County in 1880. Living in Litchfield at the time were **Hannah and Letitia Blair**, mother and sister to Missouri Van Spence and James Blair. Hannah was a washerwoman, living on Holcomb Avenue. **Fredrick and Jennie Johnson** were also in Litchfield in 1880. Fred was a veteran of the US Colored Heavy Artillery in the Civil War. In Litchfield, he worked as a barber, living (and probably working) on Sibley Avenue where the American Legion is today.

Albert Van Spence was born into slavery in 1837. He was forced to be a part of the Confederate Army, probably doing manual labor or some type of non-combat duties. Van Spence escaped to the Union and might have been part of the Union Army early on, but formally enlisted in Company M, 3rd Regiment of US Colored Heavy

Artillery in February 1865. He enlisted from Milwaukee, Wisconsin as a substitute for a Milwaukee cigar maker. Van Spence's regiment served mostly in Tennessee. He enlisted for one year and was discharged from the army in February 1866.



Albert Van Spence

Albert Van Spence and Missouri Blair married in 1869 in Fond du Lac and as we've seen, came to Meeker County in 1880. Within five years, the family had moved into Litchfield where Van Spence took on a number of jobs including lighting the city gas lights, sawing wood, salting the fire cisterns in the winter, and janitor of the Meeker County Courthouse. He would be the janitor until the family moved to Minneapolis in 1904. More stories about Van Spence can be found at the Museum, including his love for barbeque and music.

According to information shared in later censuses, Missouri and Albert had nine children, although we only know the names of seven of them. The oldest daughters **Eva** (1872-1884) and **Sola** (1873-1884) both died within a week of each other from diphtheria. Daughters **Orah** (1880-1881) and **Jennie** (1884-c.1885) didn't see their second birthdays. Son **Frank Daggett Henry** (1887-1904) died from tuberculosis at the age of seventeen. Only two of the Van Spence children reached adulthood, Ada and Archie.

The last surviving Van Spence son was most commonly called **Archie**, but also went by Van Artis, Arthur, and Archibald, to name a few. Archie was a member of Litchfield's Championship football team in 1900. Like the rest of his family, he moved to Minneapolis. It was here he became a member of Minneapolis Fire Station #24, the first all-black fire station. Archie died in 1927 at the age of 45.

Like her father, **Ada** Van Spence was a talented musician. In fact, music played a vital role her entire life. She and her first husband were part of traveling musical groups and Ada was often praised for her piano playing and vocal talents. After (presumably) divorcing her husband, Ada continued performing while living in Minneapolis. Then around 1915, she moved to Indianapolis, Indiana where she



Ada Van Spence, 1960 obituary

taught voice and piano and was music director at her church. She died in Indianapolis in 1960 at the age of 84.

Both Ada and Archie had had children, but all died at very young ages, making Ada the last surviving member of the Van Spence family.

One might wonder why the Van Spence family stayed in Meeker County so much longer than the other black families. Perhaps it's because of the G.A.R. Albert became a member of the Frank Daggett Post #35 by March 1884, before the current historic building was even built. In the G.A.R. Van Spence and his family, would have been firmly connected to the other G.A.R. members and the community.



For more about Archie Van Spence's fire station, Fox 9 News did a story earlier this year. Search Fox 9 Minneapolis Black Fire Station to find the video.

Meeker Memos

NEW Monthly email



Each month, we will send you a short and to-the-point email with the latest news and events from the Meeker County Museum at the G.A.R. Hall.

To signup, just send an email with subject "email signup" to Director@meekercomuseum.org

New or Seasonal Mailing Address?

Please help the Museum by informing us of any new or seasonal mailing addresses you might have. This not only makes sure you receive your newsletters, but also helps us save in postal fees. Thank you!

THANK YOU to the Southwest Initiative Foundation and Litchfield Area Community Foundation for funds to purchase new staff computers!

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

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Annual Museum Membership

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

Annual Litchfield Civil War Roundtable Membership

- Single \$30
- Family \$40

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

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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