



REUBEN GOLD THWAITES TROPHY NOMINATION
FOR THE
MARATHON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Submitted By

Mary Forer, Executive Director
410 McIndoe Street, Wausau, WI 54403
715-218-5418
director@marathoncountyhistory.org

President

Russell Wilson
1515 Adams Court, Wausau, WI 54403
715-574-7070
russwilson700@gmail.com

I would like to nominate the Marathon County Historical Society (MCHS) for the 2023 Reuben Gold Thwaites Trophy to honor the excellent work of the staff, board members, and volunteers, and the significant impact the organization as a whole has on our community. Through the years, MCHS has continued to excel in collecting and preserving artifacts, creating thought-provoking displays and exhibits, responding to research requests, and providing stimulating presentations and events while meticulously maintaining our two historic properties. With all of this, MCHS has greatly enhanced its standing as a valuable and respected resource in the community. As Executive Director of MCHS, I see first-hand how the dedicated staff, board members, and volunteers continually work towards excellence in everything they do.

Background

MCHS has been Marathon County's official storyteller since 1952, connecting people to the past by collecting, preserving, interpreting, and disseminating the history of Marathon County. Unofficially, the people of Marathon County began collecting and preserving the County's history and their own stories decades earlier. Today, we are all benefiting greatly from these early efforts and MCHS continues to work diligently to ensure the history of Marathon County is preserved and can be told for generations to come.

In 1954, Leigh Yawkey Woodson and her daughters donated the home of her late parents, Cyrus and Alice Yawkey to MCHS. The house became the official "home" for the Society and was used for administrative offices, exhibits, collection storage, and was open for people to tour. Built in 1900-1901, the house was originally designed by Milwaukee architects Henry Van Ryn and Gerrit de Gelleke in the Classical Revival style. Only six years later, the Yawkeys hired George W. Maher to extensively remodel the house. The Yawkey house was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1974.

To accommodate our expanding organization, in 1995 MCHS purchased the home of A.P. and Leigh Yawkey Woodson which is located across the street from the Yawkey House. Built in 1914, the house was designed by George W. Maher in the Prairie School style. The Woodsons sold the house to the Immanuel Baptist Church in 1954, and a few years later the church added a sanctuary to the back of the house. MCHS moved its administrative offices, exhibits and collection storage to the Woodson house property and opened the Yawkey house for tours.

In 2005, MCHS raised over \$3,000,000 for the restoration of the Yawkey house, original carriage house and formal gardens including a pergola and fountain. By 2008, the house was fully restored to its 1908 configuration designed by George W. Maher. The restoration of the carriage house and formal gardens were also completed at that time. The fully restored estate became known as the Yawkey House Museum, which opened for guided tours six days a week as a prime example of affluent life in the early 1900's.



MCHS then began renovations to the Woodson property, now known as the Woodson History Center. Completed in 2010, the first floor of the church addition now features a new handicap accessible entrance leading to a 2,800 square foot exhibit hall and reception area, an updated research library and an elevator for full accessibility. It also included an 800 square foot second floor exhibit hall that overlooks the first floor, and adjoining children's area. Secure and climate-controlled collection storage areas were also created in the church addition of the property.



Updates and restoration also took place on the first floor of the 1914 historic house. The restored dining room is now used as a large meeting room featuring the original Woodson family dining room table and buffet. The restored living room and sunroom have become a comfortable sitting area where visitors can leisurely browse through many photos, documents and displays while relaxing in a wonderful historic setting.

With both the renovations at the Woodson History Center and the restoration of the Yawkey House Museum complete, MCHS continued its mission of collecting, preserving, and sharing the history of Marathon County. As you will see in the pages to follow, the part-time staff, board members, and volunteers at MCHS have demonstrated dedication, passion, and excellence in everything they have done and continue to do.

Excellence In Collecting and Preserving The History Of Marathon County

The MCHS Collection Management Policy is reviewed and updated on a regular basis by a Collection's Committee consisting of staff, board members, and volunteers. This policy is used to guide the staff on collecting items that align with the organization's mission and to ensure that the items collected are properly assessed, accessioned, cataloged, and stored.



Our collections and archival staff work together to collect and preserve the history of Marathon County. Through decades of continuing education and research, these staff members have developed an expertise in collection management. As a result, MCHS has many processes and procedures in place to ensure our collections represent all aspects of our community and are properly cared for and preserved. In addition, our secure storage areas are individually climate controlled and monitored, providing the assurance that these items will be available for many generations to come.

Even though there never seems to be a lack of people wanting to donate their family heirlooms to our collections, the staff still actively seek to acquire specific items to fill in parts of our past that are not currently represented. For example, when preparing for upcoming exhibits, they've held public meetings and visited specific individuals to locate items that could be loaned, scanned or donated for use in the exhibit. At the same time, they hold oral interviews to gather first-hand stories of individuals who played a role in that piece of our history. These practices have not only been successful in acquiring new artifacts, photographs, documents, oral history recordings, etc. for the organization's collection, they have also increased community awareness and built excitement about the upcoming exhibits. The staff keep in close contact with businesses throughout the community, especially if they are celebrating an anniversary, expanding, or closing their doors, to let them know that we are interested in preserving their history.

Our procedures for taking in new donations are also clearly defined so that information about the donor and the items being donated are well documented. Each donation is carefully assessed, accessioned, and cataloged. As of the end of 2022, our database included an index of 16,500 artifacts, 20,200 photos (most of them digitized), more than 13,000 documents, and over 2,000 library reference materials. This represents only about 80% of our artifacts and 50% of our photos and archives, but with the help of our many volunteers we are diligently making progress to attain our goal of 100% .

After an item has been processed, our collections and archival staff once again use their expertise to ensure each item is properly protected and stored. Below are a few examples of the measures that are taken to ensure Marathon County's history is preserved and available well into the future.



Glassware and other delicate items are stored in metal cabinets with fabric cushions on the shelves and are interwoven with padded rolls for extra protection. Each cabinet has an exterior label describing the interior contents.



Flat storage is used for delicate items such as the beaded purses shown. Fabric cushions are used in the drawers for added protection. Each drawer has an exterior label describing the contents of the drawer.



Archival Boxes are used to store documents, photographs, textiles, needlework and related items. Each box has an exterior label describing the contents of the box.



Hanging textiles are on fabric covered padded hangers and covered with protective bags. A photo of the textile is pinned to the outside of each bag to prevent unnecessary handling.



Quilts are rolled and stored on a wall rack. A photo of the quilt is pinned to the outside of the roll.



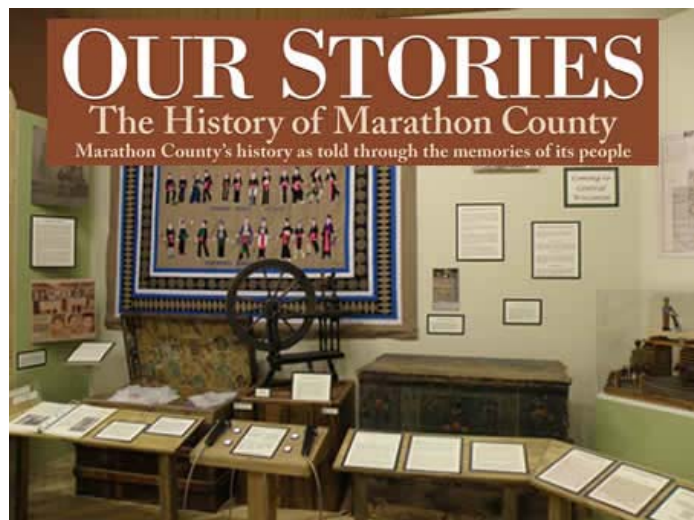
Motion lights help protect artifacts that are on open shelves.

Our collections and archival staff take great pride in the work they do and are always eager to share their expertise with others through preservation workshops, public tours of our collection storage areas, or simply answering phone inquiries. Our preservation events are always very popular and build awareness about the need for proper care of historical materials. For example, as part of the 2022 Local History and Preservation Conference, we offered a special “Behind The Scenes” tour of our collections storage areas for visiting museum professionals. Conference attendees who took the tour were impressed by the organization and attention to detail. Many of them asked for our patterns and instructions for making the clothing and doll storage bags used in our storage area. Our staff loved answering all the questions and enjoyed sharing what they know, the lessons they have learned along the way, and the many resources that they use to expand their knowledge. The sharing of their knowledge and experience is just a small example of their overall commitment to preserving local history and serving our community.

Excellence in Sharing History

Equally as impressive as our collections and archival staff is our program, education, and library staff. Over the last several years, this ambitious group held an average of 220 programs, events, lectures, and walking tours each year. Combining the people served through these programs with the number of people who visited our exhibits, research library, and the Yawkey House Museum, we served an average of 16,381 people per year over the last several years. For accuracy, 2020 and 2021 have been removed from the average calculations. However, as you will see below, even during the trying times associated with COVID, the staff’s response to the shutdown during those two years only exemplifies the breadth of their commitment to sharing Marathon County’s history to all audiences.

Visitors to MCHS have many opportunities to learn about our history. Our award-winning core exhibit, *Our Stories: The History of Marathon County*, gives visitors a tour of the people and events that made us who we are today by focusing on three themes: Arriving Here, Making A Living and Having Fun. This exhibit is also used to offer a consistent history lesson to school groups that visit our facility each year. The two remaining exhibits rotate on a regular basis offering our visitors an opportunity to dig deep into specific



historic topics or events, such as our agricultural history and rural electrification topics in recent exhibits. In 2023, we will be opening our latest exhibit, *Peek Inside: What We Collect and Why*, featuring a wide variety of items from our collection. While all of the artifacts are very interesting,

some are rarely seen by the public. Many of our visitors come specifically to tour the fully restored Yawkey House Museum and are pleasantly surprised to learn about the other free exhibits we have available. Finally, our research library is also open to the public and is well used. When visitors find they want to learn more about a specific topic or event from our past, research their family history, or would like to look through old photos, our research librarian is available to assist them.

Our programming is designed to reach a variety of age groups and can be held at our facility or at other locations throughout the County. The Little Red School House program is by far the most popular among our school districts, serving between 1,500 – 1,700 students each year. For this program, classes are held in an actual one-room schoolhouse where the teachers follow lesson plans, play games, and discuss topics similar to a typical school day in 1904. The program runs for seven weeks each spring and fall and is open to all fourth-grade classrooms in Marathon County.



During COVID, our program, education, and library staff wanted to continue offering the Little Red School House program experience to fourth grade students, so they created a kit that included all the materials used for the program. These kits were distributed to fourth grade teachers who could then run the program virtually or in their classroom. It was very well received by the teachers, and it is still being used today by different grades and by those who cannot make it to the Little Red School House in person.

In addition to the Little Red School House program, our program, education, and library staff offer several other programs that can be brought into the classroom. Our traveling trunks contain a combination of artifacts from our demonstration collection and authentic reproductions, plus a lesson plan. They are designed so that the teachers can pick them up and use them in their classrooms at their convenience. These trunks cover a variety of topics including Immigration, Toys and Games, Pioneer Days, Native American Life, and several more. Our program, education, and library staff also have programs that they can bring to the classroom which include artifacts from our demonstration collection. Popular programs that they've done in the past include tools used before electricity, such as a toaster, curling iron, etc., and all the things that a cell phone does, including an old telephone, adding machine, camera, and many more items.

The staff also offers a variety of artifact programs, lectures, presentations, and walking tours geared towards adults that are very popular among clubs and organizations, public libraries, assisted living facilities and more. We recently created a two-page brochure to be distributed

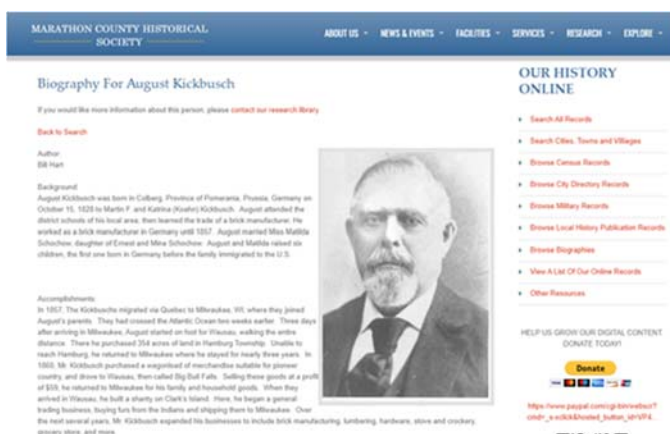
around Marathon County that describes all the programs we have available. Our staff are always open to developing new programs on specific topics, when requested.

Several years ago, staff and volunteers began our History Speaks program, which offers free monthly lectures on a variety of local and national history topics, and our History Speaks In Your Town program, which brought those lectures to locations around Marathon County to reach the people in our rural communities. Being the largest county in square miles, rural residents often struggle to visit us, so we put great effort into bringing our programming to them. This lecture series has been very popular and before COVID shut us down, we would be filled to capacity for almost every lecture.



When COVID shut us down, the staff enthusiastically worked from home and met regularly via zoom to brainstorm how we could continue to reach out to our community and share our history. As a result, two new lecture series were developed, History Chats which is streamed live every Thursday from 12:30 – 1:00 pm on our Facebook page and You Tube Channel, and History Speaks On The Air, which moved our History Speaks series to a virtual platform. Each month the staff features a different theme for our History Chats series, and continues to feature a variety of speakers for History Speaks On The Air. As a way of tracking attendance or views, we decided to count the number of live viewers plus the total number of views an event had in the four weeks after the live presentation. Based on that plan, our History Chats and History Speaks On The Air had 10,222 views during 2020 and 2021.

Our History Chats series continues virtually today, but our History Speaks On The Air has returned to the original History Speaks and is now offered both in person and virtually.

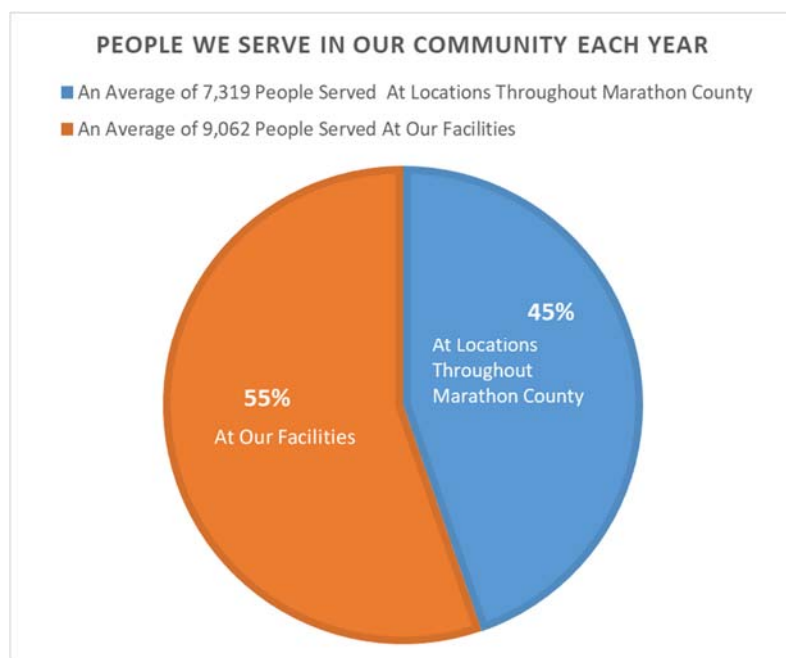


To further enhance the availability of Marathon County's history, the "research" and "explore" sections on our website (<https://www.marathoncountyhistory.org>) were created. The research section provides researchers with an index of over 133,000 entries from a variety of census records, city directories, military records, local history publications, and plat maps. This section also includes 773 biographies of people from Marathon County and 126 histories of the

towns, villages, and cities of Marathon County. These indexes have been created over time by our hard-working volunteers and are now available through our website. The explore section gives visitors an opportunity to investigate a wide variety of historic topics and includes articles, online

exhibits, digital publications, online photo collections, oral interviews and recordings, and links to our History Chats, History Speaks and other videos.

Partnering with other local organizations and events to celebrate our community’s cultural diversity is another way the staff shares our history and reaches new audiences. They often utilize our vast collection of historic materials including crafts and games at community events such as Community Fest, Children’s Fest, Harvest Fest, Winter Fest, etc. The staff also holds walking tours for The Landing, a senior club affiliated with the Woodson YMCA, participates in College For Kids and Community Connection as part of the local summer school program, provides historic artifacts for local artists to interpret as part of an exhibit at the Center for Visual Arts, and annually participates at the Wisconsin Valley Fair by setting up a historical information booth on the history of the fair and Marathon County. New and unique opportunities arise every year and the staff and volunteers are always ready to participate in the community’s cultural life experiences.



The staff at MCHS are always looking for ways to share our history throughout Marathon County. Over the years, they have made a great effort to reach out to all areas of the County to gather and tell our stories. While they continue to make a great effort to reach out, we are finding that more and more community members are reaching out to our organization first to request a program, ask for advice on preservation, request assistance and artifacts for a temporary historic display, ask a research question, and much more.



Conclusion

Each and every staff member, board member, and volunteer at MCHS takes pride in the work they do to preserve our history and tell our stories. Future generations and caretakers of Marathon County's history will greatly benefit from the efforts and expertise of this devoted group. It truly is an honor and a privilege to work with this group of people and be a part of growing this organization into the valuable community resource that it has become. I feel very strongly that these people, as a group and individually, along with the organization as a whole are all very deserving of the 2023 Reuben Gold Thwaites Trophy.

Thank you for your consideration.