



Off the Beaten Path...

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A memorial made from love: The Marie Louise Chapel



By Cheyenne Thomas

On most days, the atmosphere at the Marie Louise Cemetery in Christie is quiet, calm and peaceful. Nestled at the top of a hill at a bend in Wildwood Road, the small cemetery has long been a draw for both locals and those passing through, as a sign on Highway 73 directs them to the small sanctuary — known as the Marie Louise Chapel — on the grounds.

The Marie Louise Chapel has been in the cemetery since the early 1960s, being dedicated on Dec. 13, 1964, by Rev. Wolfgang C. Koehler. It was built by Herman and Hannah Hediger, who constructed the chapel in memory of their granddaughter, Marie Louise, daughter of Bernard and Hanna Opelt, who died on Aug. 27, 1962, after being struck by a car while riding her bicycle. She had just turned 15 a month before.

“Marie Louise Opelt was born July 25, 1947,” reads an undated article by Dennis McCann that hangs on one of the walls inside the chapel. “She was bright-eyed and bubbly, never one to see the dark side of things, and, it is clear, a beloved granddaughter of Herman Hediger Sr.”

“It’s very special,” said Charlotte Tetzlaff, one of Marie Louise’s aunts who still lives in Christie, about the chapel. “When you have a close relative that passes away, it hits really hard.”

To this day, none of Herman’s living relatives are sure exactly why he decided to build the chapel, as he passed away just eight years after building it. A native of Reinach, Switzerland, he came to the United States in 1921 when he was just 18 years old. Back in Herman’s native country, Charlotte said there were many small chapels on roadways every few miles or so, so the idea of a chapel was something he was very familiar with, having seen many of them back home.

“They had chapels like this all over there, about every quarter mile,” said Charlotte. “Travelers would stop by to say prayers in there. Families were also very close in Europe and when they moved to the U.S. they carried that closeness with them.”

After the passing of Marie Louise, the process to build the chapel soon began. Seeking out his roots, Herman was connected to a carpenter in Switzerland by the name of John Morgenthaler who soon came to the area to construct both the chapel in Christie and the Hediger House that still stands on Grand Avenue in Neillsville. Charlotte said the wood used for both the chapel and the house came from a family wood plot near Christie, adding to the familial connection of both locations.

Herman also reached out to the H. Ruethin AG foundry located in Aarau, Switzerland, to have several bells cast. One of those bells was placed at the chapel, while the others were placed at the United Church of Christ in Neillsville. The bell at the chapel, Charlotte said, weighed nearly a half a ton and had to be shipped from Switzerland to Hudson Bay, where it was picked up and transported to Christie by truck.

“The bell was cast in Switzerland,” she said. “I remember when they went over and put in the order, but I don’t remember how long it took before it was done. But it had to be shipped and that took time. It shipped from Switzerland on a grain ship into Hudson Bay. He had a truck pick it up and brought it back to Christie.”

After it was installed, the bell was dedicated in honor of another granddaughter, Beverly Knoop, who was born with cerebral palsy. Her photograph hangs at the front of the chapel, along with photographs of Herman and Hannah, as well as a painting of Marie Louise that was completed by a family friend shortly after the chapel was built.

Also inside the chapel, visitors can see the woodworking skills of both Morgenthaler and Herman. The pews are all handmade, as is the small altar/baptismal font at the front of the chapel. That altar, Charlotte said, was Herman’s handiwork, a replica of a similar altar he had back home in Switzerland. All of these small details add to the calming and welcoming atmosphere of the place, which Charlotte said is what makes the chapel so special.

“There is a family altar in the chapel that Grandpa made, and it has a baptismal bowl in the altar,” she said. “When you’re there, look at the beams in the ceiling. The craftsmanship, there is the option to sit down and take it all in. There’s a very warm feeling about the place.”

As one looks closer at the Marie Louise Chapel, one will see that the chapel isn’t just a family memorial. Above the thick wooden door, an inscription in brass reads: “Dedicated to those for whom the bell tolls.” The chapel was made to be a welcome place for all, said Charlotte, and has been the site of many different special occasions, from baptisms and weddings to church services.

“It’s not just a family affair, this is public for everyone,” she said. “There have been weddings, baptisms up there. Years ago, when some of the churches nearby were doing renovations, they had their services up there. It’s a very valued place in many different ways.”

The value of the chapel can be easily attested to. Near the front of the chapel lies a guestbook where visitors can sign in their names. Several filled books dating back to the earliest days of the chapel have been placed nearby, allowing one to page through and see just how many people have come through the site. The names in the book vary. Most are locals, but others come from different states, or even different countries. All who visit, however, are now a part of the decades-long legacy of the small chapel and of the memory it seeks to keep alive.

“The story needs to be retold every so often to keep the story alive,” said Charlotte. “Part of that legacy is the Hediger family, but there is so much more connected to it.”

The Marie Louise Chapel is open to the public every weekend for visits.



Above: The Marie Louise Chapel from the outside. It was constructed by Herman Hediger and carpenter John Morgenthaler in a similar style to Swiss roadside chapels found across the Alps. The chapel was dedicated in the winter of 1964 and was built as a memorial to Marie Louise Opelt (right), the 15-year-old granddaughter of Herman and Hannah Hediger, and for all those “for whom the bell tolls.” The gravesite for Marie Louise can be seen in the foreground of the top photo. Below is the interior of the chapel, which can be seen on weekends when the chapel is open to visitors.



CHEYENNE THOMAS/STAFF PHOTOS





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Wildcat Mound: One of the Clark County's oldest and best-kept secrets

By Cheyenne Thomas

A location with stunning views and picturesque rock formations, Wildcat Mound is known by the few who have traveled there to be one of the most obscure Clark County parks. Most days, a person can find themselves to be the only one walking along the sandstone rocks or making the steep climb to the top of the mound. Save for the occasional group of ATV/UTV riders, the mound is quiet, and gives those willing to make the hike a wonderfully unobstructed view of miles of timberland untouched by mankind. It's a rare view, one that can make the viewer feel they have traveled back in time to the days when the mound was first discovered and surveyed.

Wildcat Mound, located in the heart of Wildcat Park in the town of Mentor, Section 25 near Humbird, was first surveyed by C. Phipps in April 1853. Keeping the name simple, Phipps dubbed the place "Rocky Mound" before it fell into the hands of private owners. The name he gave the mound didn't seem to stick, as by the 1930s, the site was called Wildcat Mound due to the striping patterns on the rocks bearing a strong similarity to the stripes seen on wildcats.

"The formation of Wildcat Mound is soft sandstone," reads a 1940 news article on the mound taken from the Clark County Press. "Much of the rock is yellow with peculiar red markings, which are reminiscent of the wildcat. Presumably this is the origin of the name, and not, as related by one of the community's famous myths, because a large number of wildcats met their doom on this site."

Ownership of the mound began to change in the 1930s as the Great Depression had its effects on local landowners. The last private landowners of Wildcat Mound were F. Wheaton, who owned the area now used as the entrance to the mound, and Elizabeth Sherman and F. H. Hankerson, who owned the rest. Both parties lost the land due to tax deeds, which, according to Clark County land surveyor Wade Pettit, was the main reason why Clark County gained ownership of most of its forestland.

"A tax deed is that if someone doesn't pay their taxes for three years, then the county can put it up for auction," he said. "(In the case of Wildcat Mound), probably nobody bid on it at public auction. No one had any money back then because of the Depression. The county got a vast majority of its 130 acres of county forestland because of tax deeds."

By February 1940, Clark County had ownership of the entire mound, and Wildcat Mound became the first mound to be owned by the county. In the 1940 Clark County Press article, it was stated that the expectation



CHEYENNE THOMAS/STAFF PHOTO

The view from the top of Wildcat Mound looking toward the southwest.

was for the park to become a popular tourist spot due to its natural beauty.

"With this title perfected, Clark County now owns its first complete mound and has thus the beginning of what is likely to become a public monument of high distinguishing characteristic of esteem," the article reads. "While there are other mounds in this part of Wisconsin, most of them are in areas privately owned. Clark County owns no other mounds of major importance. The significance of the acquisition of the 'Wildcat' is the greater, too, because this is one of the most unique and distinctive of all the mounds in this part of the state. It has varied topography, a peculiarly ornamental rock, interesting spurs, remarkable overhangs, a great cliff along its southern side and a tremendous view from its top. It is no wild prophecy to suppose, with the passing years, Wildcat will become the popular picnic spot of this region and a place famed for its beauty and commanding views."

Those scenic views written about in the 1940s are mostly unchanged. A long "stairway" made of wooden logs serves as the entrance to the trail leading up to the mound from the nearby Wildcat Park. Once at the top of the stairs, the trail branches off in two directions — one to the northwest and the other to the southeast — each exploring a different spur of the mound. Hikers can follow either trail, with the paths winding along various rock formations, crevices and cliffs.

"Wildcat Mound is much larger and more picturesque than can be appreciated from the road," continues the description from the 1940s news article. "It has an extent of roughly 80 acres. The ascent has been made easy by the new trails, which lead to all the picturesque parts of the mound. The southern aspect of the mound is one huge cliff, with a precipitous drop of perhaps 300 feet. On the north side there are three spurs, each with its own characteristics. From the top there is a remarkable view to the south and from the northwesterly spur there is a wonderful view north, west and east."

Hikers can enjoy approximately 1.8 miles of trail. Although the trails are not marked, there is a well-established look to the east of the top of the steps and a lookout point to the west. The trails are made for hiking, with the trail alternating between compacted dirt and loose sand, so hiking boots or close-toed shoes with good

grip are recommended for the best experience. At the base of the mound, the trail can be pretty level, but certain spots will become steep, especially for the part of the trail needed to make the final ascent to the top of the mound.

Besides the occasional bird or squirrel, the only wildlife a person is certain to encounter are bugs, so use bug spray and check for ticks after returning from the trail. Porcupines are also known to traverse some of the small overhangs on the mound after sunset, but are otherwise not likely to be seen.

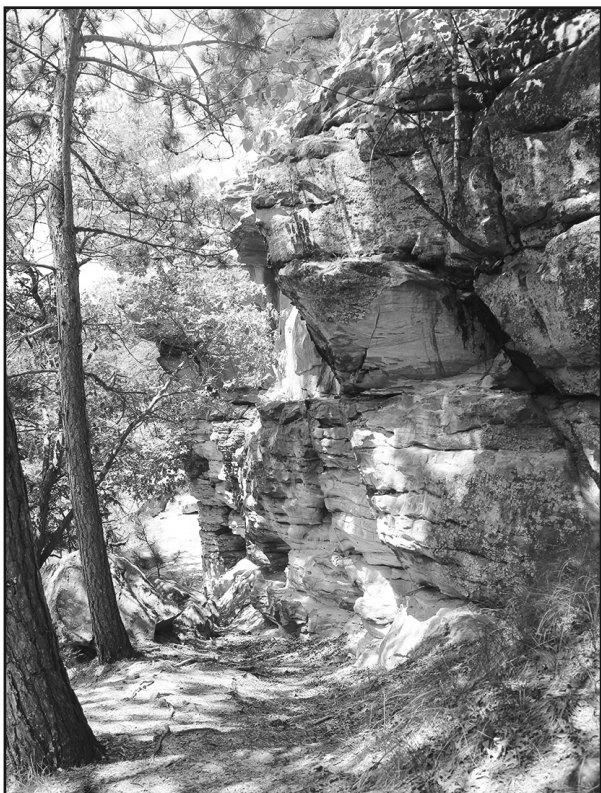
At its highest point, Wildcat Mound has an elevation of approximately 1,200 feet, giving anyone who reaches the top a breathtaking view of several miles of forestland. The best views are on the top of the southwestern side of the mound, with plenty of cliffs for a person to sit on and gaze at the view. In the fall, the changing of the colors makes for spectacular viewing and is one of the biggest draws to the mound during the year.

"Based off of what I have seen, it is a great spot for viewing the fall colors," said Clark County parks and recreation manager Nate Beaver. "It's a good spot to see the different colors and a lot of people I know go out there to see that."

In addition to good hiking gear, some other supplies to consider taking along for a hike on Wildcat Mound are a first aid kit in case of any accidents, water to keep hydrated, and some light snacks. Cell phone reception at Wildcat Mound should be good on most days as well, in case of any emergencies at the park. To maintain the natural beauty of the site, visitors are asked to take any garbage they may have with them, keeping Wildcat Mound as picturesque as when they first saw it.

As with other Clark County parks, camping is available at Wildcat Park (not on the mound itself) for \$7 per night, with camping registration available at the site. The park near the mound has picnic tables, vault toilets and grills for anyone who wants to enjoy the rest of the site either before or after a hike on the mound. The park is open year-round.

Wildcat Mound is at W9841 County Highway B, Humbird, 54746. A sole sign near the entrance to the park will be the only indicator of the park's location. If anyone is in further need of direction to Wildcat Mound, call the Clark County Parks and Recreation Department at 715-743-5140.





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Rustic Roads: A scenic drive through history



By Cheyenne Thomas

Ralph Waldo Emerson once said, “Life is a journey, not a destination.” While not quite the same, the quote by the American philosopher could also easily be applied to road trips. A staple of many summer vacations, a drive down the highway can sometimes be viewed as a burden and source of frustration as one tries to reach their destination. For a select few roadways in Wisconsin, however, it is hoped that the opposite effect can be achieved, allowing a person to take in the scenic views, slow down and appreciate our state’s historical roots.

The Rustic Roads program was established in 1973 by the Wisconsin State Legislature with the purpose of preserving some of the state’s unique backroads for future generations to enjoy. Currently, there are 124 Rustic Roads — totaling 750 miles in length — in 61 counties in Wisconsin, two of which are in Clark County.

Every Rustic Road — marked by a brown and yellow sign near the entry and exit of each route — has something unique to itself and something in common with other roads in the system. According to the State of Wisconsin Department of Transportation (DOT) website, Rustic Roads are nominated by local residents, being chosen for inclusion in the program based on meeting certain criteria. Along the roadway, there should be features that evoke a “rustic” feel, whether that is the local terrain, plants or wildlife, or man-made landmarks.

“A roadway must have outstanding natural features such as rugged terrain, native vegetation or wildlife, or other cultural and historic qualities that uniquely set it apart from other roads in the area,” reads an excerpt from the DOT website on Rustic Roads. “It should be a lightly-traveled, local access road at least two miles in length, connect with major highways to form a loop, and should not be scheduled for major improvements.”

Both of Clark County’s Rustic Roads have their own charm and features that do well to capture the different landscapes of the area. The first, R-73, is between County Highway P and Highway N north of Loyal, while the second, R-76, is between U.S. Highway 10 and County Highway B southwest of Neillsville. Both were added to the program by the Rustic Roads Board on Sept. 19, 1997.

The shorter of the two routes, R-73 runs along Cloverdale Road and Robin Avenue, covering a distance of 2.5 miles. Starting at the intersection of Highway P and Cloverdale Road just over nine miles north of Loyal, the Rustic Road follows Cloverdale Road east for 1.5 miles and then Robin Avenue north for 1.1 miles to connect with Highway N. The gravel road passes by acres of farmland interspersed with the occasional group of trees and farmhouses, calling to mind Clark County’s heritage as a farming community.

R-73’s most unique feature, however, calls back to even earlier days. On Robin Avenue, a wooden bridge stretches over the railroad tracks that cut across the county. Known as the “High Bridge,” the one-lane structure harkens back to the days when steam-powered locomotives were the chief mode of transporting goods. Due to the material of the bridge and its age, the speed limit on the bridge is reduced to just 10 miles per hour, but the view from the highest point of the bridge allows one to see a great portion of the railroad, along with any wildlife that may walk along the tracks.

If R-73 is a representation of Clark County’s farmland, then R-76 is a tribute to the county’s forestland. Nine miles long, R-76’s route is a bit more complicated. Starting at the intersection of Highway 10 and Columbia Avenue just west of the Silver Dome Ballroom, R-76 goes south along Columbia Avenue, west on Middle Road, north on Fisher Avenue, west on Sand Road and north on Bruce Mound Avenue to connect with Highway B. A vast majority of R-76 is covered in dense tree cover, though there are a few areas where sections of timber have been logged in recent years.

There are also several small bridges that cross over the two local creeks: Five Mile Creek and Wedges Creek. It is at Wedges Creek where visitors will encounter R-76’s most distinct feature: an old, abandoned railroad bridge, which is one of the last pieces of evidence of the existence



CHEYENNE THOMAS/STAFF PHOTOS

Above: an old railroad bridge found on the R-76 route, southwest of Neillsville. The bridge is the last remnants of a line that went through the community of Columbia, now long gone. Below: the wooden “High Bridge” crossing over the railroad tracks on R-73 north of Loyal.



of Columbia, a community that had been established back in the 1880s that ceased to be a municipality in 1954.

“Our Rustic Roads are unique places,” said Sheila Nyberg, the director of the Clark County Economic Development Corporation and Tourism Bureau. “It’s something special we have in Clark County that people come from all over to see. People sometimes tend to drive by the signs and not think too much about it, but they are a piece of our history. These roads keep that history alive so it’s never forgotten about. It’s like traveling back in time.”

As Rustic Roads, the speed limit on R-73 and R-76 is set at a maximum of 45 miles per hour, though the low amounts of traffic on the roads can allow a driver to drive the route a little slower to take in the sights. The Rustic Roads can also be traveled by foot, bicycle or motorcycle,

and anyone taking the routes should have plenty of opportunities to spot local wildlife — prevalent at both Clark County sites — or view seasonal changes such as fall colors.

In addition to the Clark County Rustic Roads, a map with the locations of the other Rustic Roads in the state can be found on the Wisconsin DOT website, along with other information about the program. The DOT also awards keychains, lapel pins and even coat patches to anyone who completes special objectives for traveling multiple Rustic Roads or using different modes of transportation on the roads.

For more information about Wisconsin’s Rustic Roads, visit wisconsin.gov/pages/travel/road/rustic-roads/default.aspx.