

AN EARLY HISTORY OF THE TOWN OF DEKORRA

ORIGIN OF THE NAME DEKORRA

Sebrevoir DeCarrie, a French fur trader, fell in love with Ho-Pe-Ke-E-Kaw (Glory in the Morning) while living among the Winnebago people, now known as the HoChunk. Glory in the Morning, the eldest daughter of a Winnebago chief, agreed to be his wife, and to them was born a daughter, Oak Leaf, and two sons, Cheu-Ke-Ke (Spoon) and Chah-Post-Kaw-Kaw (Buzzard). After a while DeCarrie wanted to return to his white culture and take the children with him, but his wife disagreed. The final decision was left to the children. The daughter chose to return to the white world with her father and the two sons chose to stay with their mother.

Sebrevoir DeCarrie became a French army officer and was subsequently killed in Quebec in 1760. The two sons became Winnebago chiefs. It is believed that the sons used the name DeCarrie, but the name was convoluted by the white man's interpretation to become DeKorra, Decorra, DeKorra, Decorah, Dakouray, Dekora, Decorri, De Korra, DeKauray, and many more variations. The Dekorra Precinct was named in honor of Chief Greyhead Decorah, the grandson of Sebrevoir DeCarrie and Glory in the Morning. Dekorra was adopted as the official township name by the Board of County Commissioners, and later a village was platted within the Town named the Village of Dekorra.

THE BEGINNING

Christopher Columbus, on behalf of Spain, discovered a land mass in 1492. Many consider this to be the first foreign entity to claim what is now known as the United States. However, Spain did not clearly define her claim nor did she exert any influence much further than the territory that she actually occupied. When Frenchman Jacques Cartier sailed into the Gulf of St. Lawrence in 1534, he laid the basis for later French claims that eventually included much of the continental United States. French control continued until 1759, when the Seven Years War between France and Great Britain ended and Great Britain obtained the undisputed control of all land east of the Mississippi River. At that time, the future State of Wisconsin became a part of the English colony of Quebec. English control continued until 1775, when the colonies declared independence from Great Britain. Columbia County, including the Town of Dekorra, had been controlled by four nations beginning with Spain in 1512 to 1634, France from 1634 to 1763, Great Britain from 1763 to 1783, and the United States from 1783 to present.

NATIVE AMERICANS

Prior to the claims and domination by foreign nations, the land now known as the Town of Dekorra, was inhabited by descendents of the first humans to move into the area as the last glacier withdrew, around 7000 B.C. It is believed that the ancestors of the Native Americans entered the continent across a land bridge from Siberia to Alaska.

The most important topographical feature of Wisconsin in relation to its history is the Fox-Wisconsin waterway, which extends from Lake Michigan to the Mississippi River. From prehistoric times, when the native peoples traveled the river, to 1673, when Marquette and Joliet journeyed westward in search of the Mississippi River, and for more than one hundred and fifty years beyond, the Fox-Wisconsin waterway was the most widely used transportation route within the state. The waterway was also a vital link in the great pathway that opened up the west. Along the Fox-Wisconsin traveled the many native peoples, fur traders, missionaries, soldiers, loggers and early settlers. The waterway was Wisconsin's "First Main Street". The portage between the Fox and Wisconsin and the large bend of the Wisconsin River were landmarks known across North America as "the meeting place." From the Winnebago chief, WaukonHaKa Decorah (or Snakeskin), a fur trader named Brisbois learned that the Winnebagoes referred to the Wisconsin River as the Nee-Koonts-Sa-Ra, or "the Gathering River," meaning a river having many tributaries. The Ojibwe word for the river, meaning "gathering waters," was Wees-Kon-san. The Territory, and later the State, of Wisconsin was named for its principal river.

There was an extensive network of Indian trails throughout Wisconsin connecting village sites, numerous fishing, hunting, sugar bush and wintering camps, agricultural garden beds, burial mounds, ceremonial sites, and river landings and crossings. Several major trail systems arrived in the area that was to become the Town of Dekorra. One of the more important trails was the Prairie du Chien to Four Lakes (Madison) to Portage to Green Bay trail, which became part of the Military Road, and which connected Fort Howard in Green Bay to Fort Winnebago near the portage to Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien. The Port Washington trail from Lake Michigan to the Wisconsin River also came to this area. One of the Winnebago Indian villages was strategically located at the junction of the major trails and also controlled the traffic on the Wisconsin River. It was near the Indian villages at strategic points on these trails that the early French traders established their trading posts and inns. Later, in this area, were platted first Kentucky City and then the Village of Dekorra.

THE PRECINCT OF DEKORRA

Long before the Town of Dekorra was established and Wisconsin became a state, there existed the Precinct of Dekorra, which was part of the territorial government. The precinct was named in honor of Chief Grey Haired Decorah, son of Spoon Decorah and Flight of Geese, and grandson of Glory of the Morning.

The area now encompassed by the Town of Dekorra has been a part of five different territories, the Northwest Territory from 1787 to 1800, Indiana Territory from 1800 to 1809, Illinois Territory from 1809 to 1818, Michigan Territory from 1818 to 1836, and finally the Wisconsin Territory from 1836 to 1848, at

which time Wisconsin became the 30th state of the union. The territorial boundaries would shift and change as states were created and admitted into the union.

The boundaries of the counties were continually shifting and changing as well. In 1836, the Territory of Wisconsin was established and the territorial legislature set off a county named Portage from the existing counties of Brown and Crawford. The original Portage County included all of present day Columbia County except a small portion of the Town of Caledonia, which remained in Crawford County; and it also included portions of current day Dodge County and Sauk County. The territorial legislature changed the boundaries of the county in 1838 and once again in 1841. The 1841 boundaries for Portage County included all of the present day counties of Columbia, Adams, Juneau, and Wood; and eastern parts of Taylor, Price and Iron; and western parts of Marquette, Portage, Marathon, Lincoln, and Langlade. Kentucky City was the county seat for Portage County from 1838 until 1844, when an election was held in the county to determine the location of the county seat. Plover won out over Fort Winnebago, Kentucky City was not in the running. Three election precincts were established in the area now comprising Columbia County, one of which was at the house of Lafayette Hill, located in Kentucky City, which later became the Village of Dekorra.

Columbia County was set off from Portage County by an act of the legislature dated February 3, 1846. On July 16, 1846 the County Commissioners, three in number, created several voting precincts in the new county, one being the Dekorra precinct. The Dekorra precinct included township 11, ranges 8 and 9 and the south half of town 12, range 9 lying south of the Baraboo River. This precinct included the present day Town of Dekorra, the south half of the Town of Pacific, and all of the Town of Caledonia lying south of the Baraboo River. On November 11, 1851, The Town of Caledonia was created by the County Board of Supervisors, removing it from the Town of Dekorra. Then, on November 19, 1852, the whole of the present Town of Pacific was attached to Fort Winnebago, leaving the boundaries for the Town of Dekorra as they exist today.

VILLAGES

Although the Town of Dekorra has always been primarily a rural setting, there have been five villages of note in its long history – Kentucky City, Village of Dekorra, Village of Poynette, Village of Inch, and Village of Oshaukuta. Kentucky City, located on the banks of the Wisconsin River, was platted in 1837, and included the area that would later be platted as the Village of Dekorra. On January 12, 1838 Kentucky City became the county seat for the County of Portage and remained the county seat until 1844, when the county seat was moved to Plover. Kentucky City was one of three voting precincts in the county in 1844, as mentioned previously. Lafayette Hill, owner of Hill's Hotel and Tavern, was one of the first residents of Kentucky City and was very active in local politics and in the development of the town, as shall be seen later during the discussion of the Village of Oshaukuta. LaFayette Hill's Hotel and Tavern was built in 1837, consisted of two stories and was the only known structure to be built in Kentucky City. However, a reference has been found indicating that a brick maker was located in Kentucky City as well. Hill's tavern was designated as a voting precinct on April 20, 1842, when the area was part of Portage County. Hill's Tavern was again designated as a voting precinct on July 16, 1846, after Columbia County was formed. Hill later sold this business, platted the Village of Oshaukuta in 1848, and established a new

public house there. Hill's Village of Dekorra hotel and tavern stood until the late 1950's, when it was finally torn down. During its last years it served as a shelter for a local farmer's livestock and for storage.

The plat for the Village of Dekorra, which included a portion of the Kentucky City plat, was filed on January 7, 1843, by agents for James H. Thompson of Cincinnati, Ohio. Thompson had purchased the land in the fall of 1842 and named the village after the Town of Dekorra.

At the direction of James Thompson, several stores were built. Between 1843 and 1890, the area had supported several businesses, including grocery stores, shoe shops, taverns, blacksmiths, carpenter/joiners, at least three small hotels, and a post office. LaFayette Hill's Hotel and Tavern was included in the new village as well. The village also served as a supply and rest stop for lumber rafts, steamboats and travelers on the river. Several homes were built in and near the village. The residents included carpenter/joiners, blacksmiths, a river pilot, a wagon maker, and a Presbyterian minister who served both the Towns of Caledonia and Dekorra in the 1850's, crossing on the ferry to get to Caledonia.

The village site was selected because of its landing facilities and the village itself became a major lumber distribution center for southern Wisconsin. The village plat included a 1000 foot wharf located along the Wisconsin River, which was used by commercial river traffic as a landing for the rafts carrying lumber from the northern pineries to destinations along the Wisconsin and Mississippi Rivers. The rafts would tie up along the wharf area to unload lumber, deliver and take on supplies, and often to wait for the wind to die down so the pilots could see the channel again. Steamboats also docked at the wharf area while they laid on supplies from the local merchants and farmers and loaded on cargo, such as barrels of flour, for delivery to far off places. It is not known as yet what the wharf actually looked like. We believe it was closer to the definition, "a band at the water's edge; shore" rather than "a structure of wood or stone." According to James Hastie, who first came to the area in 1856, "Rafts would tie up to some trees on shore ... When tied up they would take on supplies of eggs, meat, flour; also getting their jugs filled with whiskey and molasses." The rafting, handling, buying and selling of lumber became the major business of the village. There are stories of oxen pulling wagons loaded with lumber to destinations on the Arlington prairie, in and around Madison, and as far away as Milwaukee.

A ferry, built before 1856, was based in the village and traveled across the Wisconsin River to the Town of Caledonia for more than 30 years and was still being operated by James McMillan in 1890. The ferry was described as a large scow, usually manned by two men. A cable ran from the top of the bluff on the Dekorra side of the river to big trees on the Caledonia side. The ferry operator would use a pole to push the ferry toward the opposite shore until the current caught the rudder and propelled the ferry to the other side. One account states it cost 25 cents to take a team of horses and rig across the river. They also ferried people, cattle and hogs.

The village well, dug around 1832, was used until about 1940, at which time it was filled in. A building was erected in Dekorra Park to preserve the location of the original well. However, the structure now standing on the site is nothing like the original, which was an open, wooden structure, about four feet tall.

The first village school was located in block three, lots six and seven. The original Dekorra school house was a simple frame structure that was located across the road from the well. The first teacher was James Wilson. This school was used until the new brick school was built to the east of this site.

The second village school was built in 1878 on lots 10, 11, and 12, block nine. The brick building had separate entrances for the boys and girls. The big wood box was located in the boys' entrance, since the boys were responsible for filling it with wood stored in the wood shed located behind the building. A large, pot-bellied stove was located in the northwest corner of the single classroom. At one time there were three to four rows of desks in the center that were on skids. These desks could be stacked on the outside rows of desks to clear the floor for community dances. There were two outhouses located on the west side of the school and, in the earlier years, the school was surrounded by a wooden fence. The first teacher was James Cross. The school was torn down in 1958. Many of the bricks from the original school were used in the house now sitting on this site.

The opening of the Madison-Portage railroad began the decline of the Village of Dekorra. Today the former village site is the home of a park, several homes and cottages, a trailer court and a tavern. The former ferry crossing is now a DNR boat landing.

A burying ground was provided for in the original village plat, but the land was not officially deeded to the town until June 6, 1864. Many of the original settlers of the village and surrounding area are buried there.

James Thompson sent engineer Peter Taylor to the Wisconsin Territory to build a saw mill at a site Thompson had designated, directly west of the newly platted Village of Dekorra. Thompson sold the mill in 1854. The saw mill was later transformed into a steam grist mill which failed and the machinery was transferred to Blue Mounds.

The first grist mill in south central Wisconsin was erected in 1843, 100 rods from the Wisconsin River, at the direction of James Thompson of Ohio and his partners. Grain was brought from more than 50 miles away for grinding. The flour produced by the mill was exported as far away as the northern pineries. The mill was first leased from Thompson by Joshua Rhoades for three years. Samuel Carr traded his Ohio farm for the mill, sight unseen, moved to the Town of Dekorra and operated it until 1868, when the mill was purchased by John MacKenzie.

John MacKenzie made many improvements to the property, including a rat-proof flour house, which still stands today. The flour house is a 30'x 42' structure with a full basement and floors and walls made of solid rock. The grout and rock on the bottom was seven inches thick. A plank floor was laid over that.

A millrace is "the channel for a current of water, especially one built to use the water industrially." According to one account, a wooden dam was built on Rowan Creek (which flows into the Wisconsin River) just west of where the creek now flows under County Highway J. A dam was built to hold back the water in the creek, creating the mill pond that had been located on the south side of the road. At one time a narrow, steel bridge went over the dam. When the miller was ready to grind, someone would open the gates of the dam which allowed the water to rush down the millrace to the mill. The power of

the flowing water would turn the water wheel, which powered the mill. One account suggests it was an undershot waterwheel, meaning the water passed beneath the wheel rather than over the wheel. Later, after the mill was no longer running, a deep, well-stocked fishing hole was formed on the river side of the dam. The Dekorra mill pond was a popular curling spot in the latter half of the 1800's.

The Wilson Inn and Stage Coach Stop was located on the north side of Hinkson Creek, on the east side of County Highway J. James Wilson (born in 1802 in Scotland), his wife Mary Robertson Wilson (born in 1802 in Scotland) and nine children came to Wisconsin sometime before 1843. A tenth child was born in the Town of Caledonia in 1843. In 1850, James Wilson built the inn and stagecoach stop on the old Lodi/Portage Road at Wilson Creek (now Hinkson Creek). Wilson hewed all of the lumber by hand. Mary Wilson died in 1865 and James died in 1878. Both are buried at Dekorra Cemetery.

James D. Doty, the future governor of Wisconsin, sold 160 acres in the Town of Dekorra to William McDonald, a Scotsman. Prior to filing the Inch Village plat, it is said that McDonald had maintained a store in the Village of Dekorra. On March 28, 1851, William McDonald filed the Village of Inch plat and on February 21, 1866, he filed an addition to the original plat. The Village was located south of the present County Highway B and on the west and east sides of the present US Highway 51.

The true origin of the name Inch is not known but it is believed that it is a variation of the Scottish word for meadow, meadowland or island. Over 35 lots were eventually sold in the village and the residents included a physician, a minister, a musician, merchants, a blacksmith, and carpenter/joiners. The buildings included several homes, at least one store, a small hotel, and a blacksmith shop. The village had a designated post office and was located on a stage coach and freight line. According to Katherine Hadden's "Forgotten Villages: The Village of Inch," the school, built about 1850, was "a frame building with hewn logs for beams and joists." The school was originally built on Grove Street but, in 1876, it was moved to the west side of Main Street (Hwy 51). Male teachers taught the winter terms "when the husky eighteen and twenty-year-old farm boys attended..." Female teachers taught the fall, spring and summer terms. The school was closed in 1957.

In 1875 land adjacent to the village was donated by William Waugh, one of the earlier settlers, for a church and cemetery. The congregation formed in 1856 and met in the Village of Inch school until the church was built in the summer of 1875 at a cost of \$1,600.00. It took its name from the Village of Inch although it was not part of the village plat. The original building was 26' by 40'. The church joined the Methodist charge in 1878 and was occupied by the Inch United Methodist congregation, which included descendants of the William Waugh family and other earlier settlers, until March of 2009, when it had to be demolished after suffering serious damage from the flooding of 2008.

Many of the early settlers of the village and surrounding area are buried in Schofield Cemetery, which is located near the intersection of Thompson Road and US Highway 51 and in the Inch Cemetery located behind the church site.

The 1871 opening of the Madison-Portage Railroad caused the decline of the village. McDonald eventually purchased all but one lot back and converted the property into one of the largest farms in the area. Main Street of the village is now US Highway 51 and Grove Street is now Hebel Lane.

LaFayette Hill, formerly of Kentucky City and the Village of Dekorra, purchased land and filed the plat for the Village of Oshaukuta in 1848. The word "oshaukuta" is believed to be from a Native American language and to mean "big spear" or "a good place to spear fish." The Village of Oshaukuta was located near Rocky Run Creek and the present US Highway 51. The village was made up of 24 lots and many of them were sold. Hill soon erected Hill's Tavern which he maintained until his death in 1853. The village consisted of about six houses, Hill's tavern, a blacksmith shop, store, post office, and a public school. It is rumored that an irate farmer's wife burned the tavern to the ground because her husband spent too much time there.

The first Oshaukuta grade school, located on the left side of a now-vacated road located west of US highway 51, was used until a new school was built further north on US Highway 51. According to former students of the second school, upon entering the front door, you would either go down a set of steps to the basement or up steps to the entrance to the single class room. The entry area contained a water cooler and large coat rack. A large black stove was located in the front of the classroom and the teacher's desk was beside it. The room contained four rows of desks with five to six desks in each row. One teacher taught all classes, which was interesting for the younger students as they listened to the lessons of the older students, but boring for the older students when they had to listen to the younger students' lessons. But all students had to sit quietly and listen if it was not their turn to recite.

The school is currently a private home located on the west side of the intersection of US Highway 51 and Phillips Road. This school was originally built about 300 feet to the south of the present site. A basement was dug on the present site and the school building was rolled on logs onto the basement. The school continued in this building for several more years, until the building was remodeled into a home that now stands on the same site. Original date of construction is unknown.

LaFayette Hill died on July 7, 1853. His early death was believed to have stifled the growth and prosperity of the young village. The opening of the Madison-Portage Railroad in 1871 was the final death blow for the village. The main street of Oshaukuta is the present US Highway 51 and a monument has been placed on the east side of the highway to mark the location of the village.

The plat of the Village of Pauquette was filed on April 7, 1837 by proprietors Lt. A.S. Hooe and Wallis Rowan. James Doty, a future governor of Wisconsin, filed an acknowledgment on February 8, 1837, that he was also a proprietor of a portion of that plat. The village was named for the fur trader/interpreter Pierre Pauquette, no lots were ever sold, and the plat was later vacated.

About 1850 Doty applied for the establishment of a post office at Pauquette, which was granted, but the postal officials misread the name and spelled it as Poynette. Samuel R. Pinney filed the original plat for the Village of Poynette in 1851, naming the village after the already established post office on the site. The plat consisted of 32 lots in four blocks. In 1852 a school district was formed and a school was built one half mile south of the village. The Village was located on the Military Road, which was built in the 1830's and connected the Forts of Howard, Winnebago, and Crawford.

Wallace Rowan was the first settler in Columbia County to file a claim, said claim being filed on June 6, 1836. The creek running through the village was named in honor of Rowan. He built a double log

structure on the Military Road near this stream, which served him as a place for Indian trading and accommodation for travelers as well as his family's home. It was the first hotel in the area. The log building later served as the first home of Hugh Jamieson, a school, a dry goods store, post office and meeting house.

The Madison-Portage Railroad, which opened in 1871, was built through the Village of Poynette. This meant great prosperity for Poynette and a rapid decline for the Villages of Dekorra and Inch. No longer was the Wisconsin River a major transportation route.

The Village of Poynette filed a petition with the Dekorra Town Board to separate the Village of Poynette and the Town of Dekorra into two separate corporations. A special town board meeting was scheduled for September 29, 1892 to vote on the separation. The results of that meeting are not known at this time, but it is assumed that the petition was approved by the voters.

RURAL TOWN OF DEKORRA

Joseph Hartman settled on his property in 1849. He was a blacksmith by trade, took up farming and served as a Justice of the Peace for over 30 years. When the Madison & Portage Railroad came through the area in 1871, a flag station and siding was built near Hartman's home. Hartman was appointed postmaster of what became known as the Hartman Post Office, but it was never platted as a village. Area families used the flag station to stop the passing train so they could travel to distant cities such as Portage, Arlington and Madison. Area farmers used the siding to bring in box car loads of lime for their hay fields or to ship out box car loads of clay for brick making in other localities. The post office and siding was located on the north side of County Highway B, at the intersection of County Highway B and Keebaugh Road.

"... the brawny Scots, who upon a certain moonlight night, with their wives flatirons, hied themselves to the ice at the mouth of the Rocky Run (Creek)," according to James R Hastie, a Dekorra resident and avid curler. Curlers first used their wives flat irons and later progressed to wooden blocks which they made after the image of Scottish rocks. The men first curled out in the open, on frozen ponds or on the river itself. Later a curling building was located in the triangle of what is now the intersection of County Highways B & V. The building was built on a tobacco shed frame, water was hauled up from the river below and poured onto the floor. The doors were left open to freeze the water into a single sheet of ice to be used for curling. There was a walkway on both sides and benches to sit on. Community dances were held in another part of the building that was separated from the curling part by a wall and door. Steps led up from the curling rink to the entrance to the other part. The building was demolished in the late 1920's.

Fulton Pond was used for curling in the last half of the 1850's. Legend has it that when Mr. McMillan was digging a fence post hole on this property, he hit a spring and water came up, forming a pond. This property was owned by John Fulton when it became a popular curling spot and is located on the east side of the intersection of McMillan Road and Bilkey Road.

Henry Reedal (born in 1788), his wife Sarah Reedal (born in 1807), and their children were a wealthy family that moved to the Town of Dekorra from England around 1850. Grace Hastie tells of her

grandfather, Henry Reedal, drinking whiskey and trading horses with the King of England. Upon arriving in Dekorra, the Reedal's invested their money in property, raised horses and raced them on their own track, drawing racers from great distances. They also farmed their land using hired laborers. The Reedals were said to be "people of leisure." Henry and Sarah Reedal eventually sold off all of their land holdings and left the area. The house started as a small, wood-framed structure and the Reedal's later added a brick, 2-story addition. The Haupt family purchased the property about 1900 from the Reedal's and in about 1906 added the kitchen. A descendant of those early Haupt's still lives in the house, located near the intersection of County Roads J and B.

RURAL SCHOOLS

In addition to the grade schools built in the various villages of the town, there were several other schools built to serve the children located in the rural areas. It is unknown when Hastie School was actually built, but area students attended until 1943, when the school was closed due to low attendance. The school was built on the east side of County Highway J, near its intersection with Black Road. The remaining students were transferred to Lincoln school. It is believed the Hastie school was sold and moved to the lake area to be used as a cottage.

The first Lincoln School was located on the north side of Black Road where it intersects County Highway V. It is said that the school also served as a place of worship for a Baptist congregation. It is reported that this building was later moved to Schiefelbein Road and used as a cottage. The second Lincoln School was built on the south side of Black Road at the same intersection and was used as a school until the mid to late 1970's. It has since been remodeled and is used as a private residence.

The northern district of the Spring Prairie Lutheran congregation (Dekorra) met on January 13, 1868, to plan the building of a meeting place and school house, which was later called the Olson School. The school and meeting place, located on County Highway CS across from Smith Road, was to be a frame structure, 20 X 30 X 10 feet. The Dekorra Lutheran congregation, numbering 83 members, was organized in 1869 as an annex to the Spring Prairie charge. The congregation worshipped at the school until they built their church in 1869, located at the intersection of County Highway CS and Smith Road. A new church was built in 1971. The Dekorra Lutheran Cemetery was originally established as a burial place for Norwegians by the local Lutherans. The cemetery association was organized in 1949 to maintain the grounds.

The Jefferson School was built on the north side of Teeter Road, about half way between US Highway 51 and Stebbins Road. There is little information available about this school at this time. It is known that Iva Cuff Robson Luther was one of the teachers.

Pershing School was located on the north side of Thompson Road, just west of the intersection of Thompson and Keebaugh Roads. According to one account, steps led to the front door of this school, which opened into a long coat room. That in turn led to the single room where all classes were taught by one teacher. Students carried in wood from the shed behind the school to feed the wood stove located in the front, left corner. The teacher sat to the right of the stove in front of the black board. Shelves were located in the back, right corner where the students stored their lunches. There was also a door in this corner that opened into a small kitchen. Students brought in water from the well located near the

front steps to fill the water cooler. The two outhouses, one for girls and one for boys, were located in the opposite, rear corners of the school property. Community dances and meetings were held at the school. The original building has been remodeled into the house that still stands on this site.

There was also a school located on Smokey Hollow Road, referred to as Smoky (without the e) Hollow grade school. There is no other information available about this school at this time.