

# Blue Earth County Historian

.....  
Blue Earth County Historical Society Quarterly Newsletter

Summer 1998

## Parks Offer Recreation in County

**By Inella Burns**

Although park development is relatively recent in the county's history, Blue Earth County today operates and maintains 10 parks, a hiking and biking trail, and an environmental river corridor to help meet the area's recreational needs as well as to preserve attractive natural sites for the public to enjoy. But not until federal and state grants-in-aid became available could most Minnesota counties afford to develop parks.

Help for parks and recreation came in the late 1950s when the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission was established by Congress to study the recreational needs of the nation. With needs identified as a result of this study, Congress in 1964 passed the Land and Water Conservation Act to provide grants-in-aid for public parks. For Minnesota's county parks, that meant a cost distribution of 50 percent federal, 25 percent state, and 25 percent for the county. With this financial support, the develop-

ment of county parks was possible.

Blue Earth County is fortunate to be blessed with a great many potential recreation areas. The county commissioners' initiation into a park system began in 1966 when they accepted Frank Hecht's offer of his Lake George property of 4.2 acres, with 345 feet of lakeshore, for \$10,000. The attractive site was officially opened only as public access, but the public did not comply with what the commissioners had in mind.

### **Park attracts attention**

People swarmed in for picnics, swimming, and occasional late-night parties. The county had installed a sturdy fence, eight picnic tables, and several trash barrels. Parking was restricted to the access road, but cars not only came onto the picnic grounds, some rammed into the fence

*Please turn to Page 2*

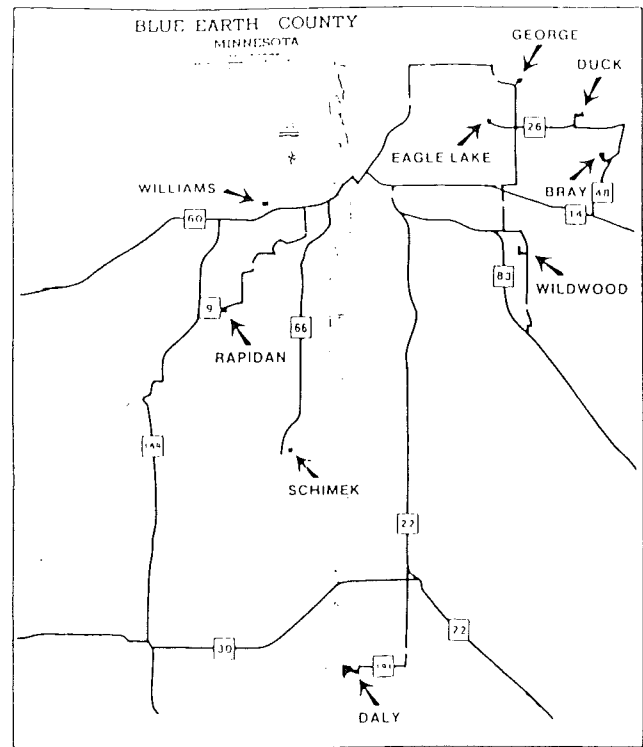
*Continued from Page 1*

and broke it. Five of the eight picnic tables were smashed, others were stolen and even some of the trash barrels disappeared. Closing the park at 10:30 p.m. in an effort to lessen vandalism was futile as the two posts with a heavy chain blocking the park entrance were soon broken and the chain stolen. Commissioners realized that maintenance of the park would require personnel for weekly clean-ups and a resident supervisor as well as help from a patrolling county sheriff.

### **Parks continue to grow**

The problems encountered with this first county park venture did not dampen the resolve of the commissioners to develop a park system. In 1968 they acquired 126 acres of land on Lura Lake from George Daly for Blue Earth County's largest park, incorporating in it the greatest variety of accommodations: camping, picknicking, swimming, tennis, nature trails, fishing and boating.

An interesting feature of Daly park is a 10-acre island. Owned by the Minnesota DNR and the federal Department of the Interior, it was given to the county on the condition that it remain in its natural state. Lester Anderson, former county commissioner, explained that the area was originally connected to the park by a



**Blue Earth County park and recreation areas.**

land bridge which was eventually covered by rising lake water. A suspension bridge now connects the island to the park.

The same year Daly Park was acquired, the commissioners bought 10 acres of land on Duck Lake from Francis Schraml.

Although a limited area, the park boasts most of the accommodations of the larger parks with the exception of camping facilities.

Swimming, boating, watercraft rentals, picnicking, hiking and fishing are available.

Volunteers, welcome additions to park crews in many county parks,

*Please turn to Page 3*



Bray Park trail is made handicapped accessible. (Courtesy The Free Press, June 27, 1980)

*Continued from Page 2*

constructed the fireplace.

### **The founding of Bray Park**

The land for Bray Park, Blue Earth County's second-largest park, was originally owned by Alexander Douglas, a Scottish immigrant who obtained the property on the east shore of Madison Lake in 1857 through the pre-emption law. The land remained in the Douglas family until 1909 when it was purchased by Agnes Bray of Blooming Prairie. The county acquired the 98 acres in 1972 for \$65,000, with the agreement that the park bear the family name.

Bray Park offers a wide variety of activities: camping, picnicking, swimming, fishing and boating. It also maintains one of the two interpretive centers of the county park system. Like Williams Nature Center, Bray has a hardtop trail for the handicapped. Former county engineer Ralph Sleeper marked out the .7-mile winding path for park crews to lay the base. An effort was made to add three unique features to Bray Park: a bocci ball court and a "vita course," or exercise trail, both European features popularized by the Late Gov.

*Please turn to Page 4*

### *Continued from Page 3*

Rudy Perpich. An attempt was also made to secure equipment for tapping the hard maples in Bray Woods to demonstrate syrup making.

### **Rapidan, Schimek and Wildwood**

Rapidan Park is a small, attractive site given to Blue Earth County by Northern States Power. With its picnic tables, a shelter and a playground, it is ideal for family or group gatherings. There are no facilities for swimming or boating, but a walk above the dam presents a scenic view of the river valley. In Eagle Lake Park, on the other hand, swimming and boating are available, but not facilities for picnicking.

Two county parks are limited to preservation and enjoyment of an area in its natural state. Schimek Park was acquired in 1982 from a Mapleton priest. The Rev. William Schimek wanted the 30-acre tract preserved as a therapeutic refuge for the public. Having used the area as a "hide-away," Schimek felt the need for a place where people can get away from stress.

"There are not enough places like this," he had said. Today, according to Schimek's wishes, the park is accessible to the public, but undeveloped.

Another county park left in its natural state is Wildwood Park. Its 20 acres of mixed woods and open

spaces lie on both sides of the Le Sueur River. The three parcels that make up the park are joined by a swinging foot bridge and a trail bridge.

### **The "gem" of the county**

Williams Park, an outdoor learning center, is the "gem" of county park organization and volunteerism, according to former commissioner Anderson, who was actively involved in developing the Blue Earth County Park system.

Lloyd Vollmer, who had hiked the area with his children on trails of their own, provided the idea for a nature park. In 1983, the Williams Pipeline Co. donated the 46-acre tract to the Mankato Area Foundation, who accepted responsibility for planning and construction of the park as an outdoor education center. The Blue Earth County Board agreed to operate and maintain it after its completion. The park has a log education building for group gatherings, a blacktop wheelchair-accessible nature trail with interpretive stations, an outdoor classroom and overlooks that provide a scenic view of the Minnesota River valley.

The Mankato Area Foundation raised \$113,098 in individual and corporate contributions to fund the

*Please turn to Page 5*

*Continued from Page 4*

park. But it was up to a committee, headed by MSU professor Perry Wood, to plan and build the center. Wood, assisted by MSU student Gary Ford, Corrie Cowley and Jane Votca, surveyed the basic 1 1/2-mile trail. Development of the center became a community effort as individuals, families, and area groups provided volunteer labor. By way of example, volunteer Tom Marks' diary notes a day in July 1985 when he, Vollmer and his son, and a group of Boy Scouts worked on building the split-rail fence with Chuck Woitas. Exper-

tise as well as materials and services were often generously donated by area industries and businesses in the construction of the park.

On the southern loop of the trail are two large Indian mounds. From the flint and charcoal brought to the surface by gophers, Michael Sculling, MSU anthropologist, has identified them as Archaic habitations, 1,000 to 6,000 years old. The six or eight smaller mounds are Woodland, 1,000 B.C. to 500 A.D. The mounds are difficult to detect today because they

*Please turn to Page 6*



Volunteers help erect 1,200 feet of a mile-long split rail fence at Williams Nature Center. (Courtesy *The Free Press*, July 17, 1985.)



**Blue Earth County Engineer Al Forsberg stands on a temporary platform on the Red Jacket Trestle. (Courtesy The Free Press, June 18, 1994)**

### *Continued from Page 5*

are encircled with sumac. Information on vegetation and land forms along the paved trail and at the scenic overlooks was the work of MSU geographer, Darell Apitz.

"Left in its natural state, the part is maturing as trees take over the prairie," Apitz said. "It's a quiet, relaxing place to just walk and enjoy the sights

and sounds of nature."

### **Red Jacket Trail**

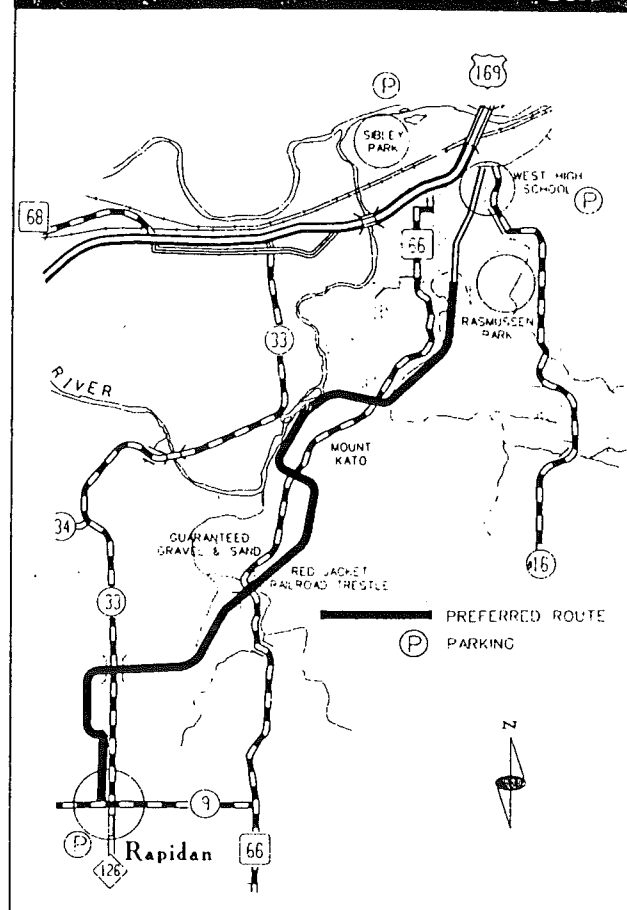
For more vigorous recreation, Blue Earth County maintains the Red Jacket Trail for hikers and bikers and the Blue Earth River Environmental Corridor for boating and canoeing enthusiasts. The Red Jacket Trail was

another Mankato Area Foundation project, this time fraught with controversy.

In 1978 interest developed in a hiking and biking rail from Mankato to Rapidan on land abandoned by the Milwaukee Railroad. As interest lagged, landowners, many opposed to the trail, bought up the land. The Mankato Area Foundation, however, revived the trail idea and in 1991 received an understanding from the Blue Earth County Board to accept ownership and maintain it if private funds covered purchase and development of the trail. The Red Jacket Trail Task Force, chaired by Perry Wood, found that about one-third of the owners were willing to donate their land and one-third agreed to sell, but another one-third were strongly opposed to the trail, a controversy that resulted in condemnation proceedings.

A second controversy arose over acquisition of the Red Jacket Trestle, the centerpiece of the trail and a point which provided a panoramic view of the river valley. A one-third legal ownership of the trestle was somewhat cloudy, but the parties involved eventually agreed to give it to the county. The other two-thirds, however, was owned by Jean Lamp, an opposition landowner. The fact that the 100-year-old trestle would be torn down if not used brought added trail support from historic preservation-

## The Red Jacket Trail



ists.

Delayed by controversy and litigation, the trail fundraisers were feeling the pressure of approaching deadlines, but in August 1993 help came in the form of a \$135,000 federal grant, assuring completion of a gravel-based trail. Construction could not begin, however, until all land litigation was completed. For a time a land trail seemed an alternative, but county engineer Al Forsberg, a strong supporter of the project, hoped that bik-

*Please turn to Page 8*



ers could cross on the trestle and enjoy the spectacular view.

Early in 1995, Lamp turned over her part ownership of the Red Jacket Trestle to the county and accepted the land settlement. She was the last of the nine landowners who challenged the use of condemnation to acquire land. Development of the 5.6-mile trail was legally free to begin work and a second federal grant made blacktopping the trail possible. The impassable, overgrown portions of the trail were cleared, steps rising from a park area to the trestle were built, and the trail bed prepared and surfaced. Again, great numbers of volunteers, industries and businesses assisted in its completion.

The Blue Earth River Environmental Corridor was begun in 1973 by Blue Earth County and Faribault County commissioners to preserve the scenic river valley and to meet the recreational needs in access and landing sites for boats and canoes. It was fully funded by the federal Land and Water Conservation Fund. In 1973, the county purchased 100 acres of land for 18 sites, ranging from 1/2-acre to 30 acres, mostly in the 5-acre range. For this unique venture of two county governments, the Blue Earth County commissioners received an award from the National Association of County Officials.

In 1975, the corridor was considerably enlarged when Northern States Power presented the county the deed to 750 acres along the Blue Earth and Watonwan rivers near Rapidan Dam, marking the end of their use of the dam to generate power. The corridor is being maintained in its natural state for canoeing or boating. Access points are available where roads cross the river.

A recent development of the county park system is Watonwan Park, a seven-acre rest stop with a canoe and boat landing on County Road 20, south of Lake Crystal. Currently, Blue Earth County is developing the Indian Lake Conservation Area. This conservation project with horseback riding and walking trails is scheduled for completion this fall.

"The future of Blue Earth County's park system looks bright," said Dean Ehlers, county parks superintendent. "Support from the public to help keep them functioning is a must. Without the public's input and volunteerism, the parks would not look as good as they do. Continued use from all of us will sustain these resources for future generations."

**Sources:** BECHS Archives; Georgia Enfield Schultz, "History of Bray Park," 1991; *The Free Press*, Mankato, MN — July 15, 1968; Dec. 6, 1972; Jan. 14, 1973; Dec. 3, 1975; Dec. 14, 1977; Aug. 5, 1983; Dec. 4, 1984; Jan. 15, 1985; Aug. 8, 1993.

Special thanks to Lester Anderson, Dean Ehlers, Perry Wood, Darell Apitz, James Jack, Lloyd Vollmer, Michael Sculling and Tom Marks for research assistance.



# Blue Earth County Park locations:

**Bray Park:** Two miles southeast of the City of Madison Lake, off County Road 48, on the south shore of Madison Lake.

**Daly Park:** This park is located off County Road 191, about 4.5 miles southwest of Mapleton and on the northeastern shore of Lura Lake, on the south edge of the county.

**Williams Park:** About three miles west of Mankato off Highway 68.

**Duck Lake Park:** About one-half mile north of the City of Madison Lake, off County Road 187, and on the south shore of Duck Lake.

**Lake George Park:** About 3.5 miles northeast of the City of Madison Lake, off County Road 187, and on the southeastern shore of Lake George.

**Eagle Lake Park:** About 3.5 miles west of the City of Madison Lake, off County Road 26, and on the northeast shore of Eagle Lake.

**Schimek Park:** About 0.6 mile east of Good Thunder, 0.7 mile north and west off County Road 10, on the east side of Maple River.

**Rapidan Park:** This park is located adjacent to the west end of Rapidan Dam on the Blue Earth River and off County Road 9 in the hamlet of Rapidan.

**Wildwood Park:** About three miles south of the City of Eagle Lake, off County Road 28, and on both sides of the Le Sueur River.

(Source: Blue Earth County Parks Department)

# Families enjoy parks...



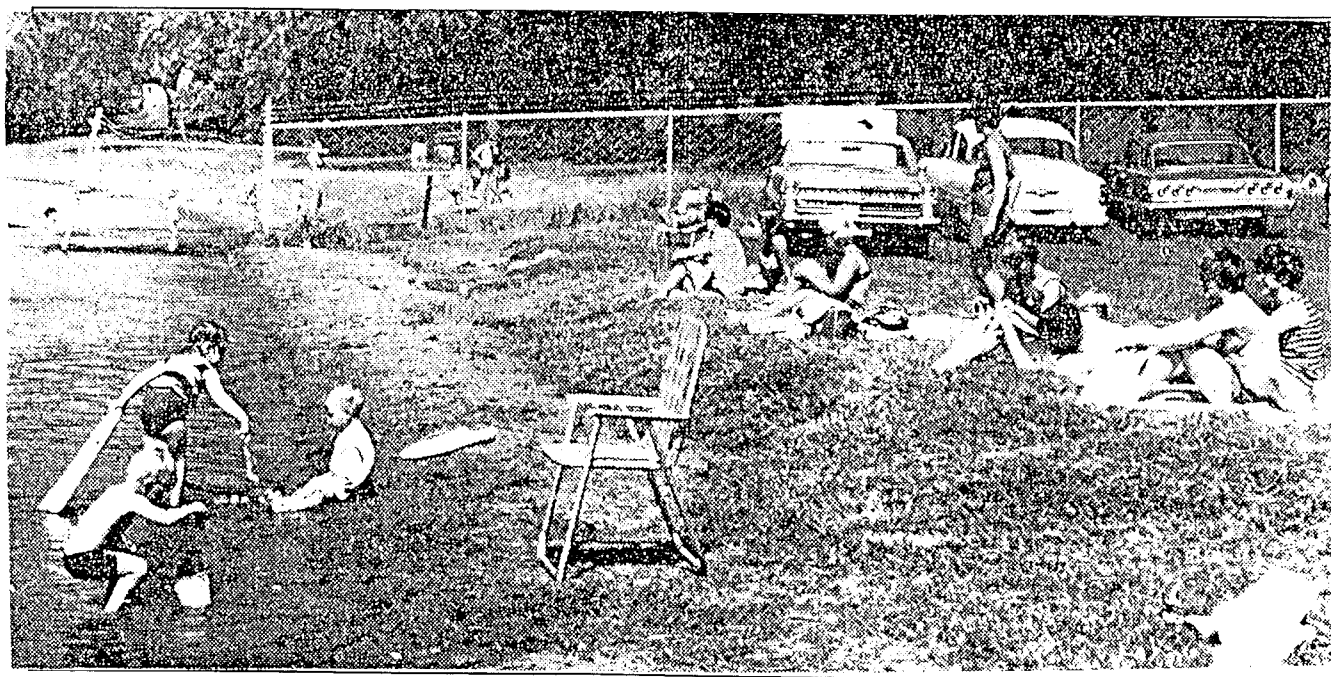
Janet Goff and her daughter, Laura Goff, enjoy the suspension bridge at Wildwood Park.

... in Blue Earth County...



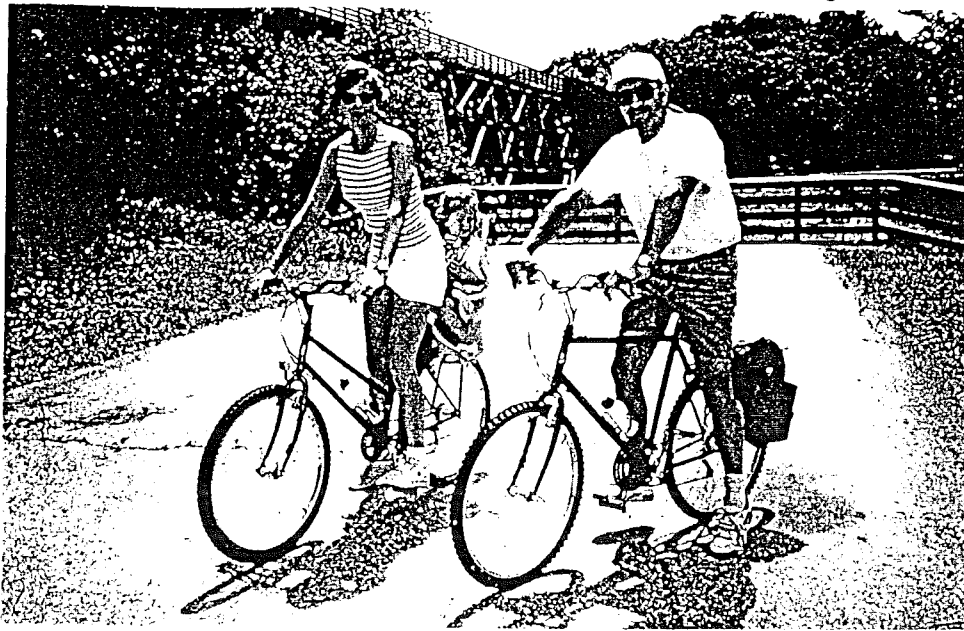
Joe Michaletz, along with his wife, Christine, and daughter, Jane, take a break near the Red Jacket Trail.

... today and yesterday



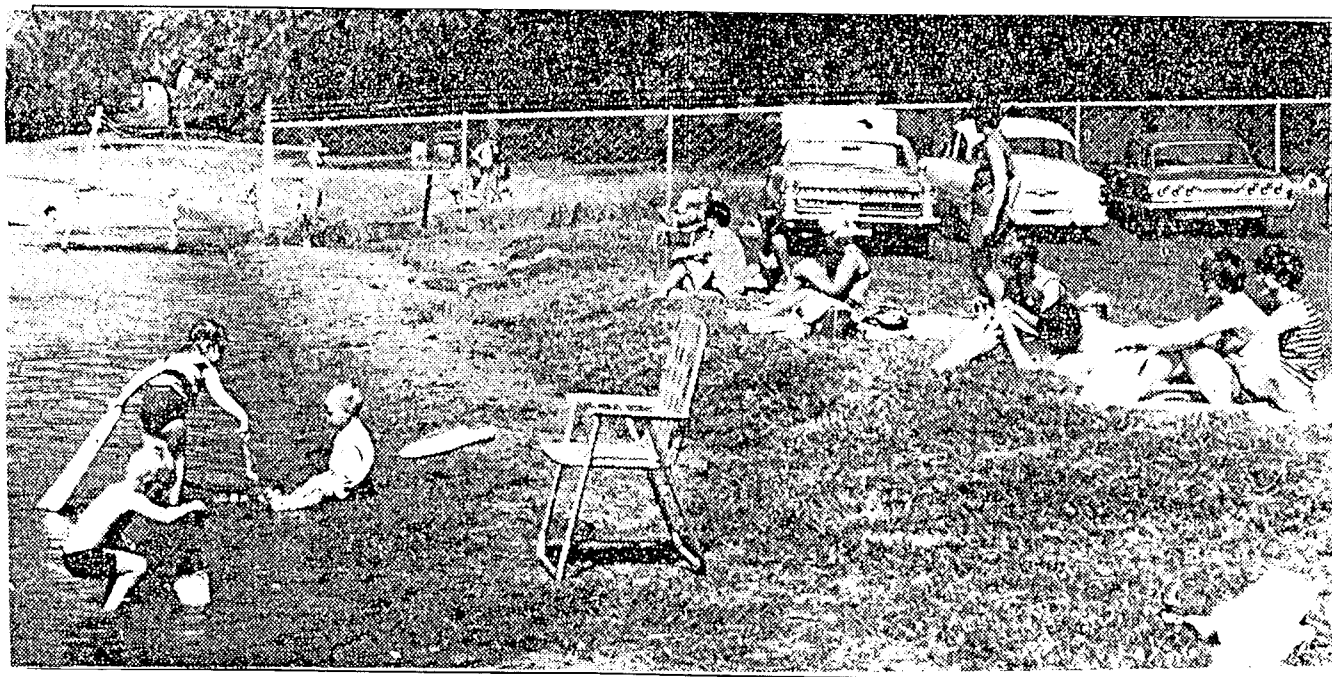
Swimmers enjoy themselves on a July day in 1968. (photo courtesy of The Free Press).

... in Blue Earth County...



Joe Michaletz, along with his wife, Christine, and daughter, Jane, take a break near the Red Jacket Trail.

... today and yesterday



Swimmers enjoy themselves on a July day in 1968. *(photo courtesy of The Free Press).*

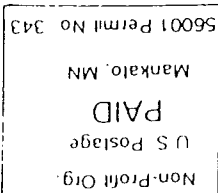
## Blue Earth County Historical Society

### Board of Trustees:

Jane Tarjeson, President  
Larry Lundblad, Vice President  
Steve Jansen, Treasurer  
Jo-An Lavitschke, Secretary  
Marcia Baer  
Jane Baird  
David Boyce  
Mike Daly  
Kandi Demaray  
Jean Lundquist  
John Rezmerski  
H. Roger Smith  
Louisa Smith  
Jeff Walker

### Staff:

Anita Baerg-Vatndal, Director  
Carol Oney, Archival Librarian  
Mary McGrew, Museum Assistant  
Rachael Hanel, Newsletter Editor



Blue Earth County Historical Society  
415 Cherry Street  
Mankato, MN 56001  
(507) 345-5566