

Now & Then in Ripon ... Looking back with the Ripon Historical Society

Family folklore research reveals truth of famous tale

Every family has its stories, traditions, heirlooms and recipes passed down over the years. Family folklore helps families stay connected to each other and previous generations. These memories also provide a family insight into its history and give it identity.

The Ripon Historical Society recently was contacted by someone wanting to know if one family's folklore had any grounding in fact. This person had run into a stranger at an antique store who claimed that one of his ancestors knew Civil War Confederate President Jefferson Davis when he was in Green Lake.

Supposedly, this ancestor had taken Davis fishing on Green Lake. When Davis was captured during the Civil War, the ancestor was able to identify Davis even though he was dressed as a woman. This resulted in a \$500 reward.

From this basic information, a volunteer researcher at the historical society was able to provide factually based information on the family legend.

This week's "Now & Then in Ripon" outlines the resources used to research the story. This will show ways that people can look into their own family folklore stories.

Google, a general online search engine available at no cost, shows that Davis (1808-1889) graduated from the Army military academy West Point in 1828. In a Google search for "Jefferson Davis in Wisconsin," the Wisconsin Historical Society reveals that Davis served on military duty in Wisconsin between 1828 and 1832. He was stationed at Fort Crawford in Prairie du Chien and Fort Winnebago at Portage.

Another Google search under "History of Green Lake, Wisconsin" shows that the first white settler came to the Green Lake area in 1835, a few years after Davis had left Wisconsin. Anson Dart (1797-1879) came to the Green Lake area in 1840 and established Dartford. Dartford, now known as "Green Lake," was incorporated as a village in 1847.

The society volunteer then turned to books written about Green Lake, which are available at area libraries and the Ripon and Green Lake historical societies. Looking at the index for "Green Lake Memories II 1847-2019," a book written by Thomas Gnewuch, a mention of Davis is found on page 97.

The information on this page was provided by Florence Norton Amadry (1907-2003) and was an edited version of an ar-

ticle that appeared in the August 24, 1988 *Fox River Patriot*. It noted, "John Wilson Norton was in the business of guiding fishermen on the lake. Among his clients was one Mr. Jefferson Davis, an Army officer out from West Point who was stationed at Fort Winnebago, Portage. This fine person fished with John many times."

The book went on to state, "Later, John entered the Civil War as a Union soldier, and Jefferson Davis became president of the Confederacy. Towards the end of the war, Davis tried to leave the state of Georgia disguised in women's clothing. John, who was stationed in Georgia, knew Mr. Davis quite well, and therefore was able to recognize President Davis that morning in May 1865, even in disguise. For his part in capturing the unfortunate Mr. Davis, John received \$500. He used this to build a house near Pleasant Point."

Another book, "The Bud Norton Story: Green Lake's Legendary Fishing Guide" by Michael Goc, related the story of Norton and Davis on page 19.

This book added, "For Norton to have fished with Davis, he must have lived on the shores of Green Lake at least five years before the town was founded ... so did he fish with Davis? No matter, for this first Norton fishing tale makes a good story, and when talking about Bud Norton is surely appropriate to begin with a good fishing story of doubtful veracity."

The society researcher now had the name "John Wilson Norton." A free online gravesite website, www.findagrave.com, shows that John Wilson Norton is buried in the Dartford Cemetery in Green Lake. He was born in 1831 in New York and died in Green Lake in 1906. This also shows that several generations of men in the family named John Wilson Norton were buried in this cemetery.

Looking for more information, the researcher then checked the Ripon and Green Lake newspapers for Norton's obituary. These newspapers are found online through the Ripon Public Library (and other libraries within the Winnefox Library System) under "research" and "local history."

Norton's obituary from the March 16, 1906 *Ripon Weekly Press* stated, "Before the war, he made Ripon his home, and then at this city joined the first troops that Wisconsin sent. At the close of the war, he moved to Dartford." The obituary went on to state, "He enlisted in



THIS PHOTO OF the headstone marking the grave of John Wilson Norton (1831-1906) is found on findagrave.com. This website shows that Norton is buried in the Dartford Cemetery in Green Lake and also lists his children. An undated and unidentified newspaper obituary on the site states "John W. Norton, a veteran of the Civil War, died at his home Wednesday. Mr. Norton was one of the squad that captured Hon. Jefferson Davis." *submitted photo*

Company B, First Wisconsin Cavalry, at Ripon, August 24, 1864, and received his honorable discharge in July 1865. The deceased was one of the squad that captured the Confederate President Jefferson Davis, for which he received a reward of a few hundred dollars."

The Pedrick Genealogy Notebooks, a local resource about early settlers in Ripon which sometimes extends into the general area, also was consulted. The Pedrick Notebooks are found on the Ripon Public Library website under "research" and "local history."

The Pedrick Notebooks did not hold any more information than that found in Norton's obituary.

Ancestry.com, is an online family history resource that has birth, death, marriage, military, census records and more. The public now can access Ancestry for free at any library within the Winnefox Library System. Access to Ancestry through the Winnefox system must be done in person at the library and on a library computer. The Ripon Historical Society also has Ancestry available for use by appointment.

Ancestry shows that Norton was living in Dartford during the 1860 census. He is listed as living with James "Habbued" (Hubbard) in the town of Green Lake. Norton later married Hubbard's daughter, Sarah. No record exists of Norton living in

The BUD NORTON Story

Green Lake's Legendary Fishing Guide

By Michael Goc



"THE BUD NORTON Story: Green Lake's Legendary Fishing Guide" by Michael Goc relates the story of John Wilson Norton (1831-1906) taking Confederate President Jefferson Davis (1808-1889) fishing on Green Lake. Joseph "Bud" Norton Jr. (1912-1979) is one of many decedents of John Wilson Norton still found on Green Lake. This book stated about Norton and Jefferson, "This first Norton fishing tale makes a good story" but also noted it was "of doubtful veracity." *submitted photo*

Ripon.

Ancestry also shows that Norton had the rank of private during his one year of service during the Civil War.

"The Roster of Wisconsin Volunteers, War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865," printed in 1886, which may be found online, has Norton credited to Ripon. This could have meant that Norton only enlisted in Ripon. It confirms his military service dates, which show that Norton served for one year at the end of the Civil War.

Information from the Wisconsin Historical Society and other sources confirms that soldiers from the First Wisconsin Cavalry as well as the Fourth Michigan Cavalry captured Davis. Davis was found in men's clothing, however, he did have his wife's shawl wrapped around him. The two regiments shared in a \$100,000 reward, (worth about \$1.9 million today.)

The reward as divided and the amount each soldier received depended on rank. A private like Norton received \$166.75, which is equal to \$3,351 today. In 1865, a private was paid approximately \$174 per year.

The last resource that the historical society researcher contacted was the Dartford His-

torical Society at info@dartfordhistorical.org. They confirmed that the information collected on Norton was correct and accurate.

However, the general public might want to first contact a local historical society before doing their own research. Local historical societies have knowledge that they can share with people looking into the history of their families, homes, buildings and businesses.

Through all of this research, it now is known that only some of this Norton family folklore is rooted in truth. Because Norton was born in 1831 and Davis left Wisconsin in 1832, they did not know each other. Norton would have never taken Davis fishing on Green Lake. However, Norton did receive a reward for assisting in the capture of Davis during the Civil War, but this reward was substantially less than \$500.

The Ripon Historical Society is the oldest continually operating historical society in Wisconsin. It is open Fridays and Saturdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

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