

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

Anti-horse thieves association still is around today

Approximately one vehicle is stolen every 32 seconds across the United States, which adds up to about a million vehicles each year.

In the age before automobiles, stealing a horse was a serious offense. Not only could a horse be used for personal transportation, many horses were used as farm animals, which assisted in producing an income. A thief easily could steal poorly guarded horses in the sparsely populated rural areas around Ripon.

To maximize the number of horses stolen, thieves would often work together in groups, terrorizing one area after another.

Being a horse thief also was a lucrative trade. In the 1800s, the average price of a horse was between \$150 and \$200 (approximately \$3,500 to \$5,000 today).

Many anti-horse thieving organizations started to spring up across America and one of those was the Nepeuskun Anti-Horse Thieves Association (NAHTA). The NAHTA was organized in 1864 during the Civil War.

Horses, especially work horses, were needed during the war and stolen horses were sold both to the Union and the Confederate armies.

A blurb in the July 2, 1942 *Berlin Journal* reported that "In the early 1860s settlers in the town of Nepeuskun rose in honest wrath against a group of horse thieves who plagued the section. The settlers banded together in an anti-horse thief association, pledged to trail and capture horse thieves whenever they might perpetrate a raid."

It went on to report that "Some 75 framers, including their families, joined the association."

Nepeuskun is a township located north of Ripon with the southern border in Fond du Lac County, the southwest corner in Winnebago County and the western boundary is Green Lake County. A Native American name taken from the Sugar Maple Tree, Nepeuskun means "Sweet Bush."

The town hall is found at 1475 County Road E and a sign for the NAHTA is seen in front of the building, which stores the associations records.

"A quick survey of the *Milwaukee Sentinel* index and the Wisconsin Historical Society's holdings reveal the presence of at least two dozen anti-horse thief associations between 1865 and 1890 in the state," Matthew S. Luckett said in the winter 2006-07 issue of *Wisconsin Magazine of History*.

On Dec. 5, 1889, the NAHTA



FEATURED IN FRONT of the Nepeuskun Anti-Horse Thieves Association sign in 1990 are, from left, Don Janke (1933-1999), Victor Schram (1909-2002), Mildred Schroeder Schram (1916-2013), Earl Pinkall (1925-2019), Lyle Krebs (1918-2009), Ralph Brotske (1917-2005) and Lorraine Walejko Brotske (1925-2018). The sign was painted by Mary Smoody Rector (1912-2015), who had once studied under Norman Rockwell.

Judy Brown/The Country Today photo

was incorporated and registered in the state of Wisconsin. The Oshkosh Public Museum holds a ledger that contains incomplete meeting minutes of the NAHTA starting in 1881. The incorporation is confirmed in an entry dated April 3, 1890, where the members resolved and approved to re-adopt their constitution and bylaws as a result of the society becoming legally incorporated by the state of Wisconsin.

Unlike the NAHTA, many of the anti-horse thief groups, which Luckett called "vigilante organizations," did not file articles of incorporation.

"These articles of incorporation gave the organizations the right to exercise constabulary powers and make arrests," Luckett wrote. "An 1861 state law granted constabulary powers to pursue and prosecute horse thieves specifically. By granting official recognition and non-stock corporations, as well as law enforcement authority, the state's legal authorities legitimized these institutions and thus elevated the anti-horse thief association to a level transcending the ad hoc, mob or desperado-ed vigilante groups that are familiar to people."

Local newspapers carried several mentions of horse thieves in the area. *The Oshkosh Northwestern* dated Nov. 11, 1878 reported that "One night lately Mr. J.R. Martin of Nepeuskun, missed a span of horses. He at once gave the alarm to the neighbors, nearly all of whom belong to the Nepeuskun Anti-Horse Thief Association.

Soon a large number were aroused and on the warpath, every avenue of escape being blockaded. As a result, the horses were soon captured near John Thorndyke's, where the thieves evidently meant to steal a buggy."

A May 1895 *Oshkosh Northwestern* reported from the Berlin office that "The barn of John Jordan, a well-known farmer of Nepeuskun, was broken into and a farm horse valued at \$150 was stolen. The anti-horse thief association of the town being notified the members turned out in full force and found the horse about halfway between Mr. Jordan's place and this city. It was evident that the thief became frightened and abandoned the animal."

By Jan. 12, 1928, the *Oshkosh Northwestern* wrote that "The days of horse thieves, being now a matter of history, the association meets chiefly for social purposes. There are still funds in the bank, collected from the dues of the members for use in offering rewards for horse thieves. The interest from this money is now used to pay for banquets and other social activities."

The paper went on to report that the county agricultural agent "suggested that organization 'revamp' itself to fit modern conditions" and pursue chicken thieves. The agricultural agent informed the NAHTA membership that chicken thief organizations were found around the country and one was located nearby in Winnebago County.



THIS UNDATED HOT pad from the Nepeuskun Anti-Horse Thieves Association is found in the archives of the Ripon Historical Society. The association holds an oyster stew, chili and potluck dinner each January.

submitted photo

The article noted that "The suggestion seemed to meet with general approval, but no action was taken."

The last time the NAHTA mounted a search for a horse was in 1964, when a Palomino was stolen from a farm west of Omro. The horse was traced to dealers in Oshkosh, Waukesha, Illinois and Michigan before ending up in New York. It was thought that the horse dealers all knew the horse was stolen, so it was moved around rapidly.

The owners of the horse did not get the horse back because the cost of shipping the horse was more than the horse was worth.

For years, the NAHTA met for their annual meeting at Schroeder's General Store in Rush Lake. That building was eventually condemned and razed. The group then met in the Nepeuskun Town Hall from 1960 until 2020.

The group did not meet for three years starting in 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lack of space in the town hall.

"The town hall was really too small to fit all of our members and the food," current president Les Achterberg said. "This year, Ryan Prellwitz let us use his place at Vines & Rushes. This was really nice of him and gave us a lot more space."

Vines & Rushes Winery is located at 410 Country Road E just south of the Nepeuskun Town Hall.

Earl Pinkall (1925-2019),

president of the NAHTA for almost four decades, noted in a Jan. 21, 1986 *Fond du Lac Reporter* article that oyster stew has been served at the annual meeting since 1864. The oysters used in the stew came from Griedl Fish Company of Oshkosh for more than 125 years. Today, the oysters for the stew are purchased from Webster's Marketplace in Ripon.

About eight years ago, chili was added to the menu and those attending the dinner are asked to bring a dish to pass. After the dinner, the leftovers are auctioned off and donations are solicited to help cover the cost of the event.

Today, most horse thief organizations have disbanded or faded away however, 160 years after its founding the NAHTA still offers membership to anyone who wishes to join. Lifetime membership once was a \$1 per couple. It eventually was raised to \$2 and in 2024 the membership fee became \$5 per couple.

The NAHTA holds its annual meeting along with the oyster stew and chili dinner on the third Thursday in January from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m.

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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