

GAZETTE

A family publication dedicated to our unique heritage

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Our Neighbors



Our county is known for its interesting glacier-sculpted hills, valleys and beautiful conservation areas that are home to rare plants and animals. Its hard to imagine, but over the last 180 years, many animals, insects and plants from other places around the world have invaded McHenry County!

Without the natural limits of their own habitats to control their population, these invaders do very well here, too well in fact. McHenry County isn't the only place affected by them. Invaders are an enormous problem all across the United States!

An ecosystem is like a complex jigsaw puzzle and you know what happens to a puzzle when one or more pieces get lost. Many foreign invaders are so aggressive they quickly multiply out of control and before long completely squeeze the native species out of an area! There are many instances of foreign species aggressively taking over habitat in Illinois and it may surprise you to discover which familiar plants and animals really do not belong here. Prairie chickens used to live in our county when the early morning air of springtime was filled with their booming calls. Today that sound is gone. This is one example of a native species that just could not compete with a more aggressive invader, in this case, the pheasant. This bird is not the only invader that affects the whole puzzle.

The McHenry County Conservation District (MCCD) has been very successful in their ongoing restoration projects. Their projects are part of a larger picture of restoration going on in the entire Chicago area and includes many forest preserves, nature preserves, wetlands and prairies. In this case restoration means returning the ecosystem to a condition stable enough to support the native animals, insects and plants that once lived in it. It means putting the jigsaw puzzle together again. There is far more to restoration work than cutting down aggressive invader trees, though that is often where the physical work begins. Recreating and restoring the ecosystem so native plants, insects and animals can return to their proper home takes time and hard work. This means doing research to gather important information and making certain the puzzle

pieces of the ecosystem fit together properly.

Why is research so important? Recreating a wetland habitat for whooping cranes in an area where whooping cranes would never visit does not help those birds. Before any attempt is made to restore an area, it is important to discover what the landscape looked like and what was here back when whooping cranes were regular visitors to McHenry County. This is where written history plays an important role.

McHenry County Conservation District's Natural Resource Management Department uncovered a very exciting piece of information while conducting historical research. McHenry County had its own early scientist! Since that discovery, his letters and notes have helped MCCD restore several natural areas and reintroduce several species that disappeared from our county years ago.

George Vasey was born in 1822 in Scarborough, England. His family immigrated to North America and settled in New York. Coming from a large family of ten children, he left school at age twelve to take a job as a store clerk. Young George had an insatiable curiosity for flowers and plants but was unable to afford books to study. So badly did he want to learn that he managed to borrow several botany books and copied them entirely by hand! His job as store clerk also allowed him to make some influential friends. He met Dr. Knieskern, a physician and botanist, as well as several other well-known men of science including Asa Gray, one of the most famous scientists of the time.

George's love of science steered him into a career in medicine and he graduated from the Massachusetts Berkshire Medical Institute at age 24. Shortly after that, George married Martha Scott. One year later they traveled along the Erie Canal and then overland to arrive in the small McHenry County town of Ringwood. The next 18 years of his life would be spent here practicing medicine, raising a family and pursuing his favorite pastime, collecting plants.

As the years passed, George's medical practice thrived. The construction of the Fox River Railroad in 1854 allowed him to practice medicine in Elgin.

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Valentine Taffy

Many people look forward to the first snowfall when the snow is deep and time seems to stand still in quiet beauty. Winter is a time for special activities that can only happen with snow. Americans enjoy themselves in winter

today in much the same way they did 100 years ago. Then as now, snow gives us a reason to go out and play! Who can resist sledding, snowmen and snowballs? One of the more interesting winter social gatherings back then was the Valentine party with paper valentines, delicious food and fun games, and everyone's favorite, a taffy pulling contest! Pulling sticky taffy with well-buttered hands was a way for young sweethearts to talk and laugh together.

The main ingredients of brown sugar and butter were cooked until thickened and poured onto a clean pile of snow to harden. Once cool, the fun would begin! The taffy must be pulled and stretched over and over until the dark brown color turned a buttery yellow. It could then be twisted into ropes and silly shapes or cut into pieces. The couple with the best looking taffy would win often a prize!

It's easy to have your own taffy pull, but don't toss the hot mixture out on the snow. There is far too much pollution in snow these days and you could get sick. Instead, pour the mixture out on a well-buttered cookie sheet and set outside to cool for a few minutes. When it's nearly hard to the touch, take it out of the pan and pull. This is a two-person job! As it stretches, fold the taffy over and pull again. Repeat this over and over until the color turns very pale.

Saltwater Taffy

- 1 cup sugar
- 3/4 cup light corn syrup
- 2/3 cup water
- 1 tablespoon cornstarch
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 3/4 teaspoon salt
- 2 teaspoons vanilla or another flavoring, like peppermint

In a large saucepan, combine all ingredients except the vanilla. Stirring constantly, cook over medium heat until the mixture reaches 256 degrees Fahrenheit on a candy thermometer (or until a small amount dropped into a cup of cold water forms a hard ball). Stir in vanilla or other flavoring. Pour onto a buttered cookie sheet. Let cool.

Old Fashioned Taffy

- 1 1/4 cups sugar
- 1/4 cup water
- 2 tbsp. white vinegar
- 1 1/2 tsp. butter, plus extra for the pan & for coating hands
- 1/2 tsp. vanilla extract.

Watch the boil carefully so the taffy mixture does not burn. Follow the above directions and **be sure your hands are buttery!** Now stretch and pull and stretch and pull until the taffy lightens in color. Wrap individual pieces in waxed paper to keep them from sticking to each other.

We would like to introduce ourselves

We are the McHenry County Historic Preservation Commission (HPC). We are often confused with our friend and partner in history, the McHenry County Historical Society. Both are dedicated to preserving history, but it's easy to assume they are the same if you don't know what our differences are. Here are two more examples of those differences:

The McHenry County Historical Society draws wonderful attention to the historic treasures of our county through their educational programs. Public awareness is often the first step to preserving and protecting McHenry County's history.

Preserving and protecting is where the Historic Preservation Commission comes in. A plaque awarded by the HPC ensures a place in the future without fear of destruction.

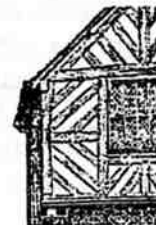
History Detective

Do you live in an old house or do you suspect an old building is nearby? Here are a few visual clues you can use to help you determine if a building is old. Remember, never walk on someone's property without permission!



Brackets

Half Timber



False Front

History in your pocket



Do you know that just about everything has a story – even the aspirin tablet in your medicine cabinet? Medicine has come a long way since Dr. Vasey's time. Back then most people relied upon *folk medicine* or medicinal treatments that were passed down from one generation to the next.

While many folk remedies had no real effect, some were terribly dangerous. Treatments such as wearing cloth wrapped fish heads around your neck to cure a sore throat or rubbing skunk oil on your bare feet to treat the flu are some of the sillier remedies of 150 years ago. Bloodletting and blistering the bottoms of a patient's feet with a hot iron were two of the more extreme and dangerous treatments of the day. There were a few folk remedies that really worked and some of those are the foundation of today's medicine.

Many of today's medicines originally came from plants: strong painkillers made from poppy flowers, heart medications made from common garden flowers and strong headache medicines made from a grain fungus are just a few exam-

ples of plants used in medicine. Of all the folk remedies derived from plants, there is one that is truly amazing: the one we would come to know as aspirin!

In 1838, the Italian chemist Rafael Piria first produced salicylic acid, the working chemical of aspirin, from the flower buds of meadow sweet (*Spiraea*) and from the bark of the willow tree (*Salix alba*). This new compound reduced fevers and pain but was very hard on a patient's stomach. Many chemists tried to create a gentler medicine out of salicylic acid but they were all very unpopular. Nearly every patient complained of severe stomach upset. In 1853, a French chemist named Charles Frederic Gerhardt published the results of his experiments on making the salicylic acid easier to use. Unfortunately, with all the stomach upset, it didn't take long for people to lose interest.

In 1899, a German chemist named Felix Hoffmann, desperate to find a drug for his father's arthritis pain, stumbled across Gerhardt's notes. He thought about medications commonly used to treat upset stomachs and wondered if those ingredients could be added to salicylic acid to make it gentler to use. He added extra stomach soothing ingredients to Gerhardt's mixture and tried it on his father. The new drug had wonderful results. His *buffer* against stomach upset worked!

At the time of his discovery, Felix worked

for Bayer, a German dye and chemical company. He took his idea to Bayer and they immediately went into production. This new wonder drug would be called aspirin. The new name a spir in comes from a for acetyl chloride (the buffering ingredient), spir for *Spiraea* (meadow sweet, the main source of salicylic acid) and in just because it was a common ending for medicines of the time!

Aspirin, in its powder form, was soon saving lives and easing pain all over the world. In 1915, Bayer developed the famous buffered aspirin tablet that we are familiar with today. It wasn't long before the company was the world's producer of aspirin.

During World War I, the Bayer Company set aside aspirin production and began making chemical weapons and explosives for the war. When the war ended, Germany was forced to make *reparations* or to *pay back* the world for their part in the war. The Treaty of Versailles, a 1919 agreement between France, England, Russia, and the United States had German companies giving their product rights or trademarks away in reparation. This included the wonder drug aspirin.

From that moment on, dozens of companies went into aspirin production. All of the aspirin products lining store shelves today are based on the original recipe and all originate in folk medicine!

For more information about the McHenry County Historic Preservation Commission, contact the McHenry County Department of Planning and Development at 815-334-4560.

Hunting for Everyday History



Learning about the past is as easy as asking your parents, grandparents, older family members and friends about their childhood. Discovering their history can be fun and interesting.

In each issue, the Gazette will offer a question to ask on your Everyday History Hunt. In issue four, we ask:

“Do you have a favorite winter memory from your childhood?”



Did you know that the word *dormer* comes from *dormeir*, the Latin word for sleep? It literally means *window of a sleeping place*. Knowing this makes it easy to imagine what the Latin word refers to. It also gives us clues to the meaning of other sleep-related words such as dormitory and dormant. Dormers can be found jutting out from the side of a roof. Most often this little window belongs to an upstairs bedroom.

You may not recognize all of the words in the Gazette but you can look up their meaning at the Public Library. Your local library offers many books about old house styles and features!

Our Neighbors *continued* ↻

Back in Dr. Vasey's time, it was common for doctors to accept food and other goods as payment for their treatments. He opened a dry goods store. Extra income was needed to support his growing family of four children and his mother Jane who had come from New York to help Martha care for their family. Even though George was busy with his practice and shop-keeping, he still managed to find time to study the wild plants in the area and write his letters. He was now a well-respected scientific pen pal to many of the scientists he had met as a young man.

By 1858, Dr. Vasey joined Lake County scientist John Kennicott and several other famous naturalists to establish the Illinois Natural History Society. Dr. Vasey served as the Society's president and collections curator for several years and became a writer for their Natural History Survey Publication. Designed to support natural history and farming improvements, the Society eventually evolved into the Illinois Natural History Survey that still records the biological resources of Illinois today. He wrote many books and articles including detailed plant inventories of the entire state as well as his opinions on buffalo. He wrote articles for a farming magazine called the *Prairie Farmer*, and even a book about laughing and smiling!

In 1871, George joined John Wesley Powell's famous second exploration of the Colorado River and he

Fun Fieldtrip ↻

If you are interested in seeing the house, tools and personal collections of an early naturalist, you can visit The Grove in Glenview, Illinois. This was once the home of Dr. Vasey's friend and partner in science, John Kennicott. The Grove Heritage Association and The Illinois State Historical Society have restored the house and grounds and both are open to the public. Tour the Kennicott house and see some of the original furnishings and collections, visit the resident wildlife in the Grove's Interpretive Center or walk two miles of beautiful trails through the 124-acre preserve. For more information, call (847) 299-6096

129 years studying the natural history of Illinois!
Visit the Illinois Natural History Society web page at:
<http://www.inhs.uiuc.edu/welcome/index.html>

Learn more about pushy plants and alien animals at:
<http://www.invasivespecies.gov/education/act.shtml>

eventually accepted a position in Washington, D.C. as the first botanist for the Department of Agriculture. He also became the first Director of the Smithsonian's National Herbarium, a department totally devoted to plants, and remained so until his death in 1893.

All that remains of Dr. Vasey's time here are his notes and correspondence. Across the street from Ringwood's historic post office sits a small patch of grass where the Vasey house once stood. Two days before the house was demolished, McHenry County Conservation District volunteers managed to salvage some pieces of the old house for the Powers-Walker House restoration project, including Dr. Vasey's old wooden medicine cabinet!

Dr. Vasey's discoveries and observations will continue to help in the ongoing restoration work of northeastern Illinois. How fortunate for us that this doctor and scientist lived and studied here in our small town of Ringwood! His important contribution to science will ensure many puzzle pieces go right back where they belong.

Almanac ↻



There might never have been a United States or a presidency without General George Washington leading the Continental Army. The first banquet to honor the great *Commander and Chief* was held in New York in 1782 while he was still a General, but it was later that his birthday was chosen for a national holiday.

The original holiday was in remembrance of Washington's birthday in 1796, the last full year of his presidency. There was some confusion about what day to celebrate. According to some mid-18th century calendars, he was born on February 22, 1732, while other calendars in use back then say he was born on February 11! By the 1800's, Washington's Birthday was firmly rooted as a national holiday. Parties called *Birth Night Balls* were common, as were Washington-inspired public speeches and celebrations in taverns throughout the land.

Another well-respected president with a February birthday was Abraham Lincoln. He was born on February 12th 1809. The first formal observance of his birthday took place in 1865, the year after his assassination, when both houses of Congress gathered for a memorial. While Lincoln's Birthday did not become a federal holiday like George Washington's, it did become a legal holiday in several states.

In 1968, legislation was passed that affected several federal holidays by changing the days the holidays originally fell on. This was done to simplify the yearly calendar of the nation's holidays. Today, President's Day, on the third Monday in February, is a day for honoring Washington and Lincoln as well as all the other men who have served as president.