

Palmyra Historical Society

Newsletter Fall 2013 *Securing Our Place in History*



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New Details on the WWII Death of Palmyra's Frank Murn

FRANK MURN

By Sherry Murn Einerson

January 21, 2013 marked the date sixty-nine years ago that Frank John Murn gave his life for his country in World War II.

Born September 1, 1915, he was the oldest son of Frank and Jane (Pakiz) Murn of rural Palmyra. Both had emigrated from Austria in 1901 and 1909 respectively. After working in the copper mines of Michigan, my Grampa Frank Murn, moved to Milwaukee where he met my Grama, Jane Pakiz, and they married in 1910. Their first two children would be born in West Allis. They lived there for about five years and then bought a farm on the Jefferson-Walworth County, three miles from Palmyra.

Grampa would purchase more land until the farm was 320 acres, enough to keep four sons busy! My father, James "Jim" Murn, was born ten years after his brother Frank, and admired his older brother as did the rest of the siblings. The older sisters, Jane and Mary, welcomed him and grew to love him dearly, and both would tell how wonderful he was to everyone. The younger siblings, Jim and Bill, looked to Frank for guidance and were taught hunting, farm work and how to learn more by reading. Younger sister Frances remembered that Frank was a kind person and a protector of everyone. He assumed leadership of the family, and they all depended on him.

Grampa never drove, and after Grama quit driving, Uncle Frank took the responsibility. He gave of himself unselfishly, doing all he could to help the family during the depression and would often provide the meat on the table after a morning hunt before going to school. My father said they all knew Frank would be there for them, making sure Grama and Grampa didn't work too hard, and the siblings learned to do their part.

As I grew up and spent time on the home farm, I started asking questions about Uncle Frank of my grandma. I soon realized how sad she became when she thought of him. The day came when she and I sat down and she told me the whole story.

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After graduating from Elkhorn High School in 1929, Frank was staying weekdays at the home of older sister Jane and her husband, Frank Banko, in West Allis, while he worked as a production worker at Kearny and Trecker that made milling machines for industry. His employment was assisting the war effort, so he was given several exemptions from the draft but chose to enter the service so his younger brothers wouldn't have to.

He was inducted into the army in Fort Sheridan, Illinois on February 22, 1943 and left for training at Fort McClellan, Alabama where he served in Company B, 14th Battalion. In 1943 he went home on medical leave to recuperate from surgery. It would be the last time he would see his family and the farm he loved so much.

Frank was then transferred to Greenville, Pennsylvania, and in October was sent to Fort Meade, Maryland where he was placed with Company B, 5th Battalion, 2nd Training Regiment. It was here that he was told that "where they went overseas depended on what Italy was going to do next." Frank knew that soon he would leave and that they would be in a combat zone. By November 1943, his letters home simply said "we are somewhere in Africa." It was heart-wrenching to read his letter home written December 23, 1943 where he wrote that he knew he wouldn't be home that Christmas, but hoped to be the next year. He always ended his letters by saying that the family "shouldn't worry about him, he was doing fine." The last letter was dated December 31 and he

finally did tell the family that he was "somewhere in Italy." As part of a replacement regiment, Frank was assigned to Company A of the 1st Battalion, 141st Infantry, 36th Infantry Division, known as the "Texans." (The Division had originated as Texas National Guard Division.)

The last letter I found from Frank was dated January 9, 1944. It was obvious he was preparing for combat and attempted to calm his family, but I'm sure everyone at home knew. My Grandma told me she felt very uneasy and by mid-January thought of Frank constantly. One night she was awoken from a deep sleep, and when she opened her eyes she said Frank was standing at the foot of the bed. He smiled and told her it would be all right. She didn't tell anyone until later, when the telegram was delivered, telling the family he was "missing in action since the crossing of the Rapido River in Italy." She couldn't remember what night he appeared, but she always believed it was the night he died!



The family and Frank's fiancée, June Cauly, could not accept that he might be dead. They always hoped that he had been taken prisoner by the Germans and would be found, or that he was hospitalized and unable to contact them. In June, 1944 the family had a memorial service for Frank. By February, 1945 the Army sent a letter to the family that Frank was assumed dead, since nothing indicated he survived the battle.

This was supposed to give the family closure, but it never came until they received a letter that Frank's remains were found by an Italian who was planting trees in an orchard in 1953. In February, 1954 Frank was brought home for burial at St. Mary's Cemetery in Palmyra. For several years June Cauly would visit at the farm until she finally knew it was time to resume her life, and she eventually married.

I always wished I could do something to give my grandparents closure by finding someone who may have served with Frank at the Rapido River. He did become friends with a soldier from Illinois, who was sent everywhere Frank was sent and they even found each other in Italy! Sadly, after the war my grandparents received a letter from his parents, hoping he had survived the war and could tell them anything about their son. It turned out that their son was killed in Italy shortly after Frank.

In 1990 my father traveled to Italy and went to the place where his brother had fallen. He met the man who had found the remains. The trip helped my father but he still knew nothing of what happened in the battle and how Frank died.

In 1993, while working for the Veterans' Service Office, I decided I would see what I

I could do to get some answers. I contacted the 36th Division organization and couldn't believe how they all wanted so badly to help me! I wrote a letter to their newsletter editor and included all the information I could find about Frank as well as his picture. It seemed like nothing would come of it and then, one night my phone rang and when I answered it I knew the old soldier from Tennessee was the one that could help me.

We both became emotional when we realized that Uncle Frank had the foxhole next to his after they had crossed the river. He said Frank's face had haunted him all this time, but he could not remember his name, so couldn't tell the family what he saw.



Frank and June Cauly, Ft. McClellen,
Alabama, May, 1943

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He said that when the advance was ordered to cross the river they carried rubber rafts for use in building a floating bridge. The German artillery answered their fire and blew the rafts to pieces. They then had to carry wooden boats to the water's edge and, with what was left after the Germans tried to shred them, they made a footbridge to get across. The men were supposed to be across by midnight on January 20 but weren't. It wasn't until 4 a.m. on January

21 that they reached their position, when daylight came, exposing them to heavy German fire. Machine gun fire, grenades and rockets were coming down constantly, and he said Frank was in the foxhole next to his with a small tree between them. The machine guns cut the tree down as if a chainsaw was used, then the mortars hit. This is when Frank was hit and was killed instantly. The soldier looked on and saw what had happened but there was nothing he could do. Soon, their surviving officer told the eleven men left that they would surrender. They did and spent fifteen months as Prisoners of War in a German camp until the Russians liberated them. It was crushing to hear this because if they'd surrendered sooner maybe Uncle Frank could have survived with them as a POW.

My father and I traveled to Tennessee to meet the soldier and his wife. Both were relieved of their burden after the stories about Uncle Frank were exchanged. Members of the 36th Division were among those who demanded a congressional investigation after the war ended. They felt that General Mark Clark had sent them into a devastating battle that decimated the unit. The Germans were well fortified with concrete bunkers and had anticipated the assault as an attempt to divert attention from the allied landing at Anzio, a few miles to the north. British General Sir Harold Alexander, commander of the 15th Army, had ordered General Clark, commander of the 5th Army, to begin about January 21st or 22nd on the German Rapido line south of Monte Cassino. The orders were to make a thrust as strong as possible, just before the Anzio landings. The result was a costly failure, with the 36th Division losing at least 2,100 men killed, wounded or missing in 48 hours.

Frank died in the early hours of January 21st, 1944. He received the Purple Heart, Bronze Star, Combat Infantryman's Badge, Presidential Unit Citation, European-African-Middle Eastern Campaign Medal with bronze battle stars for the North Africa and Italian Campaigns, American Campaign Medal, Army Good Conduct Medal, World War II Victory Medal, Rifle Sharpshooter Medal and the Honorable Service Lapel Button. 4

Grampa died in 1962 and Grama in 1986. She would feel the pain of loss again, when a grandson was killed in Vietnam in 1967. My father and his older sister, Frances (Koshinz) are the only of Frank's siblings left. They still mourn the loss of their big brother as if it were yesterday, not almost seventy years ago.



Frank and Jane (front and center) with their children. The arrow points to Frank.

Frank Murn and the other Palmyrans who served their country in WWII are the subject of our exhibit entitled *Palmyra Answers the Call in WWII* currently displayed in the Turner Museum.

Editor's Note: In the Winter, 2012 newsletter, Terry Tutton wrote of the Palmyra residents who died while serving in the country's armed forces. Among the dead was Frank Murn. Terry recounted the details of the battle and the situation in which it was fought, based partly on a book that he read called *Crossing the Rapido: A Tragedy of World War II*.

Terry's article was eventually read by Sherry Murn Einerson, Frank's niece, who contacted us with more of Frank's story as well as details of the Murn family that were absent from Terry's article. We thank Sherry, who lives in Dodgeville, for sharing her work with us.

OTHER WISCONSIN HISTORY Visiting the Peshtigo Fire Museum

Wisconsin has over 300 local history museums. Here is a brief review of one of them.

Boy, does this town have a story to tell! The Peshtigo Fire occurred on October 8, 1871, the same day as the Great Chicago Fire and others in Door County and Michigan's Lower Peninsula. Of a population of 1,700 (about the same as Palmyra now, 1,200 were killed, the worst fire disaster in United States history.

The entire area was suffering from prolonged drought, roaring winds and high temperatures. Stores of downed trees and slash in and around the town provided the main fuel for the blaze that happened at night, contributing to the horror and chaos.

You will never forget the testimony of the local Catholic priest who was asked by a desperate resident fleeing the blaze: "Father, is this the end of the world?"

The museum also has a nice collection of logging and farming tools.

It is located at 400 Oconto Avenue and is open May-October 8, 10 am to 4 pm.

THANK YOU THANK YOU

to our members and friends who contributed to our "**Help Make Our Past Perfect**" campaign. We are pleased and proud to announce that we went over our goal of \$700 to match a grant that we recently received from the Wisconsin State Historical Society to purchase Past Perfect software.

We have quickly moved to buy the software that will enable us to use a modern computer program to keep our membership and materials, artifacts, photographs, printed matter and things we have acquired in our 33 years of operation as a historical society.

It will take work, but we expect to get better handle on many of these items so that they can be retrieved quickly and accurately to serve you better. We also expect to put photographs of several of our best collections on-line at the website **Recollection Wisconsin**. You can visit the website <http://recollectionwisconsin.org> to see why we are excited that our collections will be searchable along with many others of Wisconsin's finest.

Thank you for coming through with such flying colors. Although you might not notice anything new for awhile, we are confident that we will be a more streamlined and responsive organization.

NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

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Old Settlers Day

A good crowd turned out on a cool July 28th to honor this year's Old Settler, Howard "Dan" Poulson. As in the past it an abundance of great special home-made pot-luck dishes, ample time and opportunity to meet and talk with friends and neighbors and old classmates, as well as to hear from Dan, whose speech provided all with his background and community activities that he has been part of, and the Palmyra that he knew and grew up in over the past 60+ years. A great time was had by all and we look forward to celebrating the 130th Old Settlers Day July 27, 2014, so mark your calendar and hope to see you there.

Final Call

Now is the time to renew your membership. The Palmyra Historical Society a non-profit organization whose main means of sustaining the ability to operate is through donations and membership dues. If you haven't renewed your membership do so NOW. The date in the upper right hand corner of your address label will tell you the year that you are paid up through. Please look and if it doesn't say 2013 or higher, please update your membership. Our membership fees have not changed for the past several years and are still \$15.00. If you feel this date is incorrect please contact the society so that we can straighten it out.

Remember also that we are building our computer data base so please include your email address with your membership renewal. Be sure to look at our website; www.palmyrahistorical.org, or contact us at: palmyrahistoricalociety@centurylink.net.

We Need Your Help

I find it hard to believe that none of our members responded to our call for assistance in last quarter's newsletter and could give us an idea for articles or displays of interest. Please help us out and let us know what you would like us to focus on in providing the Palmyra area history to area residents.

As we consider and think about new articles for the newsletter or displays for the museum gallery, we would like to know what you, our members, would be interested in seeing or reading about. Any comments or suggestions you might have would be greatly appreciated and might lead to other inspirational thoughts that would be of interest to other members. Please let us know what you would like to see or hear from us to do with your museum.

Pat Vetense

As September draws to a close we are losing Pat Vetense, our Board secretary. Pat has been a faithful and dedicated worker in helping maintain the both the Museum and the Society. She will be truly missed and I want to thank her for all her work and support, and to wish her well as she moves from the Palmyra area to Kenosha where she will be closer to her family. Pat, thank you and best of luck on turning the page and starting the new chapter of your life. Please keep in touch and stop by when you are in the area you will always be welcome.

Christmas Tree Lighting

Please note that we have **changed** our traditional day for lighting of our Christmas tree from the Friday after Thanksgiving to the **First Saturday of December** (Dec. 7, 2013). We are making the change this year to join with the Chamber of Commerce and light the tree after the Chamber's Christmas Parade. Plans are for the parade to start at the lake and proceed up Main Street to the Museum where it will end with the tree lighting and a few community Christmas carols. Following the lighting, the museum will be open for light refreshments and our special show. This year's show will be titled "***The Collectors***" and be a display of anyone's personal collection of whatever they collect and want to display. Last year we had displays of Pendleton shirts, Bells, Cups and Saucers, Duck Tags, David Winters Miniatures, Beany Babies, Strawberries, Star Wars, Nut Crackers and many others. It is fun to see what others collect and we are looking forward to an bigger and expanded show this year so if you have anything you would like to display please notify the Museum or contact Tom Rauschke who will be in charge of this year's show.

If you haven't yet sent in your 2013 **membership dues**, please use the form
Below to bring yourself up to date. Dues are \$15 per year. We thank you.

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Name: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Amount Enclosed: \$ _____ Dues: \$15 per year _____

E-mail address: _____

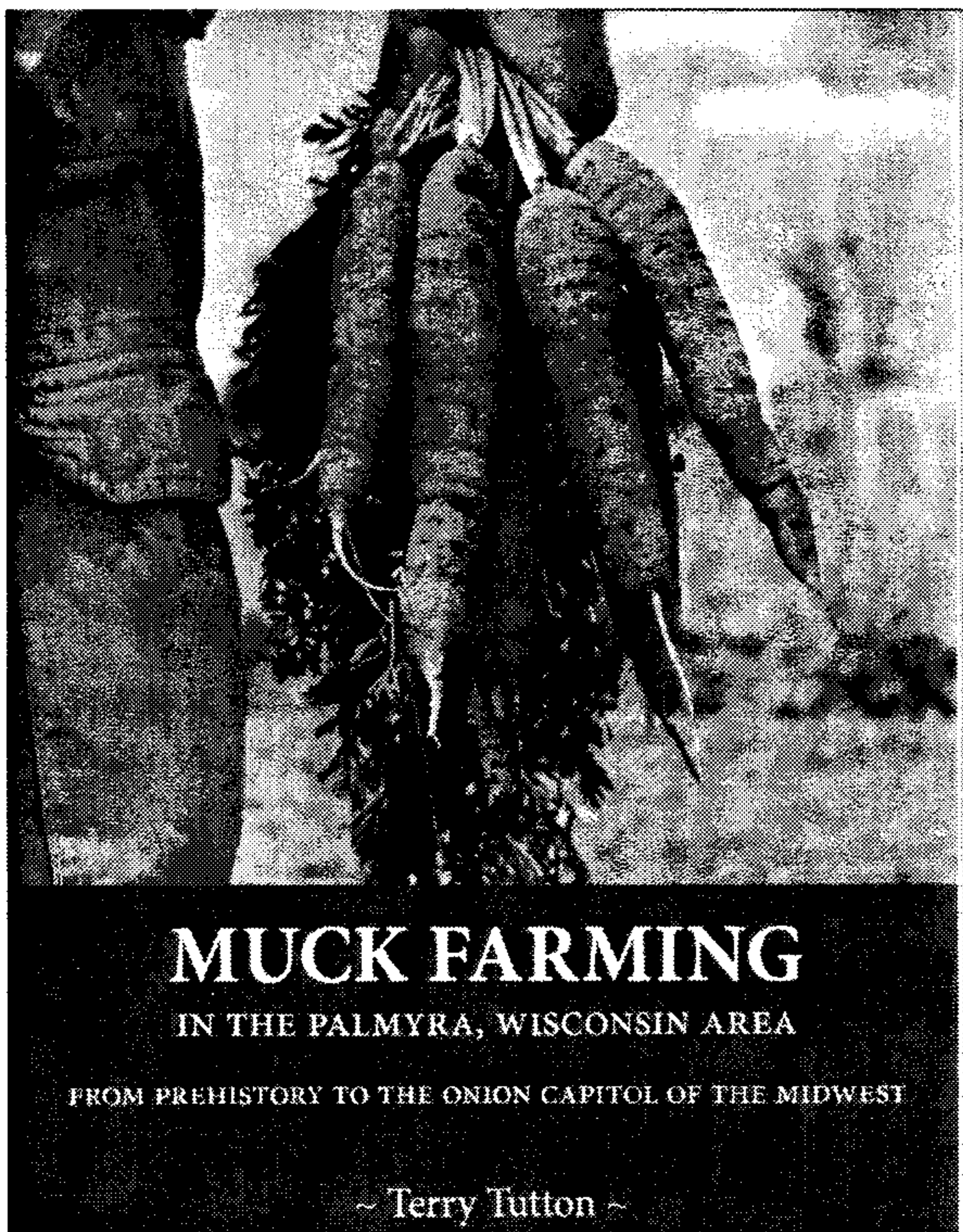
website: www.palmyrahistorical.org

HONORING THE PALMYRA HIGH SCHOOL CLASS OF 1963



1st: D. Radake, C. Pethick, B. Fraley, J. Cashmer, D. Harnden, J. Martens,
B. Zimmerman, C. Pennell
2nd: Mr. Olson-Advisor, J. Nelson, D. Johnson, J. Omdoll, S. Petta, J. Orchard,
P. Stein, L. Christ, R. Carpenter, C. Wojtkunski, P. Whitmore
3rd: R. Scheets, B. Gilbert, B. Heinzelman, R. Northey, L. Berglin, D. Koss,
M. Cummings, D. Carnes, J. Sheppard
4th: J. Bowey, T. Lytle, D. Grimes, C. Buenger, J. Jaeger, W. Kuhl

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MUCK FARMING, written by our curator Terry Tutton is available for purchase at the Historical Society for \$15, (\$20 with an accompanying CD entitled "Palmyra, Then and Now" produced by the Society. This book is well-researched; Terry worked on a muck farm in his youth.

Stop by the Turner Museum during regular hours (Saturdays, 10 am to 2 pm) or call us at (262) 495-4245.