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The 1997 Wisconsin History Class

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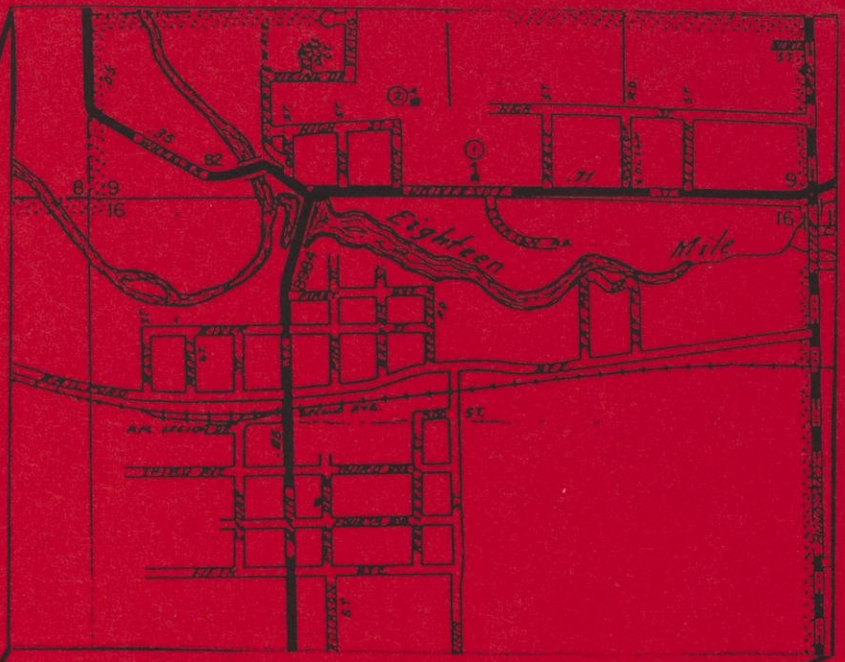
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**Halfway
Between Here
and There;**
The Colfax Story



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By the 1997
Wisconsin History
Class



*Halfway Between
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*A special thank you to
Jon Weber who worked
tirelessly to help us edit
this booklet so that it would
flow as coherently as
possible!*

1997 Wisconsin History Class

Purpose Statement

Halfway Between Here And There; The Colfax Story is intended to be a living document. As a living document, it represents a starting point from which students--young and old--can explore the recorded history of Colfax, Wisconsin. As students explore, they can add their findings, experiences, old stories, photographs, or new information to this text. In doing so, it is hoped that with each new contribution, this book will grow to become an ever changing-ever available-document allowing the opportunity for generations past, present, and future to share, understand, and appreciate the experiences valued by others in their community. By sharing, the experiences of the past, students--like those who created this project--will not only learn about their community but about themselves.

Preface

The initial idea behind this history class project was to put together a brief historical sketch of the Colfax Area. As the project grew, information and interviews provided by family, friends, and neighbors began to provide glimpses into the colorful past of Colfax. There is much more information yet available in the past issues of the Colfax Messenger, scrapbooks, photo albums, diaries and the stories told by family members over the holidays. Therefore, this book should be seen as a compilation of the most readily available materials providing an accurate--yet basic--picture of Colfax, Wisconsin. Thanks to all those who take time to read and contribute to this living document.

The Beginnings

The history of Colfax almost seems incomplete without a description of the area and the Native American people who lived here long before the community of Colfax was ever settled by Europeans. Most anthropologists believe that Native Americans migrated from Asia across the Bering Strait and into the inland area of the North American continent. The Bering Strait Theory attempts to show how nomadic hunters from Asia crossed a land bridge that formed between Asia and Alaska when glaciers froze and retained large amounts of water, thereby, lowering the sea level.

In time Native Americans adapted to their surroundings. Anthropologists explain that the Paleo Indian Culture existed between the period of 10,000-8,000 B.C. The people of this culture followed and hunted large game animals. As the large herds of game animals declined, so did the

Paleo Indian culture. Between 6,000 and 4,000 B.C., the Archaic Indian culture emerged. During this period, Native Americans adapted to a growing human population and their ever changing environment. Small game animals were considered a food source. Gathering plants supplied additional food needs. Between 1,000 B.C. and 400 A.D. a new culture, the Woodland Culture, emerged and grew. Seasonal migrations for gathering and trading were combined with the gradual introduction of semi-domestic plants such as corn, beans, and squash. The use of copper for weapons and tools grew. Native Americans made pottery and built large mounds of earth that had religious meaning.

In time, another culture, the Mississippi Culture, spread (600 A.D. and 1500 A.D.). During this period, the Colfax area was at the northern end of a vast trade network extending from Aztalan (in present day Jefferson County, Wisconsin, east of Lake Mills). Aztalan (approximately 21 acres in size and surrounded by double stockade walls) was first discovered in 1836 when researchers found a large "village" that showed links to the larger Cahokia culture centered near present day East St. Louis. The name Aztalan came from an Aztec legend of a northern city where the Aztecs were thought to have originated. Similarities between artifacts and buildings led to this name, but in truth, the Aztecs never came from Aztalan. The current period extends from 1500 A.D. to the present.

Most Native American communities have explanations and understandings of their presence in North America that differ from the scientific point of view. The Ojibwa people of Wisconsin are no exception. Ojibway stories explain that the Ojibwa did not come from Alaska, Asia, or the west. Instead, their stories tell of Ojibway life along the east coast and a westward migration that eventually brought them to this area.

Migrating from the east, the Anishinabe gradually moved west, except for the Daybreak People who stayed behind to guard the eastern fire of the people. These people are thought to be the Abnaki. Guided by their dreams, the Anishinabe looked for an island shaped like a turtle and the food that grew on the water (wild rice). Such an island exists. In all there were seven stopping places along the migration: 1.) Turtle Shaped Island, 2.) Niagra Falls (Kichi-La Be-Kong'), 3.) Detroit River, 4.) Manitoulin Island, 5.) Sault Ste. Marie (Baw-Wa-Ting'), 6.) Duluth (Spirit Island), and 7.) Madeline Island. On their migration, different groups were in charge of

different aspects of Anishinabe life. The Potawatomi were in charge of keeping the sacred fire. This fire was not to go out during their migration. The Ottawa were responsible for providing food for the people. They hunted and traded during the expedition. The Ojibwa protected the faith of the people. They kept the sacred birch bark scrolls. In time, these groups would separate and gradually move to different parts of the Great Lakes Region.¹

Present day Colfax is located in a contested war zone--the road of war--that the Ojibwa and their enemies the Souix, fought to control. This area not only supplied food, clothing, and other necessities, it provided transportation routes via the riverways.² The Indians gradually gave land to the government in treaties in exchange for hunting and fishing rights on the land.

Early Colfax residents had some interaction with the Native Americans. In one incident, some white settlers were washing clothes in a stream near some Native American women. After hanging the clothes up to dry, the white women became distrustful of the Native American women. They guarded the clothing as though they thought the clothes were going to be stolen. The Native American women did not like this insinuation much and let the white women know--eventually cooler heads prevailed. It seems that the two groups did not trust each other very much.³

Development

As Europeans and Americans moved to Wisconsin, the prairie and forest lands surrounding Colfax were settled. The timber was soon cleared for housing. Growing wild in the bluffs and countryside of Colfax were various fruits including blueberries, red raspberries, wild grapes, and wild plums.

Homesteaders came from as far as Norway and New England. The land that would become the village of Colfax was once the farm of John D. Simons. Simons is regarded as the first settler on the village site. He had great influence on the development of the Colfax community. Simons not only built the first log house in the village in 1867, but in the spring of 1869, he built a grist mill to grind wheat flour, corn meal, and buck wheat for local farmers. Interestingly, Colfax was not his initial destination. Simons, born in New York State on July 26,

1834, first moved to Michigan in 1852. After a lonely ten months, he returned to New York. Still believing himself to be an adventurer, he moved to southern Wisconsin in 1854. In 1861, he settled in the Colfax area. As Colfax grew, he worked as the postmaster (1872-1894)⁴ and involved himself in farming, operating a general store, milling, and working as a merchant.

While John D. Simons is regarded as the founder of Colfax, it is important to note that other "pioneers" seem to have arrived in the Colfax area before or about the same time as Simons. Information and records about these settlers and settlements (and others in Running Valley) were presented to the Old Settlers' Association by Mrs. D. C. Baldwin on October 11, 1916, and October 20, 1917.

"In April, 1858," she say[s], "Cyrenius Baldwin and James Mathews left Waukesha for Dunn County. They first went to Prairie du Chien and took the boat for Rumsey's Landing. There they met Charles Boles and he brought them over to where Colfax stands at the present time. There was so much water it was almost impossible to travel around. C. Baldwin bought a half section on 17 and James Mathews a quarter section on 8. This land he (Mathews) bought half for himself and the other half for his brother, A. T. Mathews. Then they returned to their homes in Waukesha County. In 1864, C. Baldwin drove a span of horses through, bringing his wife and two children, and arriving in November. They also brought a span of two-year old colts. D.C. Baldwin and Albert Hinkley left Waukesha Oct. 1, 1864. They drove 121 sheep to Oconomowoc, shipped them to Sparta, and drove them from Sparta to Dunn County.....They arrived at the J. E. Mathews home Oct. 20, 1864. Albert Hinkley went back to Waukesha the next year. On May 20, 1865, this flock of sheep was destroyed by prairie fires." These sheep were valued at from \$10 to \$50 per animal, as they were of high grade, and wool was worth \$1 a pound at the time. Some time after this--the exact date has not been ascertained--Mr. Baldwin started a store in the village which he continued to operate until his death in 1892. "In May, 1860, James and Andrew Mathews, of Palestine, Waukesha county, started with their families for Dunn County. They had two wagons drawn by two yoke of oxen. On their arrival they camped near the river on land owned by Cyrenius Baldwin, not knowing exactly where their own land was."...Among other early settlers near Colfax mentioned by Mrs. Baldwin were: John Hill, who came from Waukesha County in 1860, James Lowry in 1863, and John Lowry and wife in 1864, also from Waukesha County. David Philander Knapp, of Ogdensburg, N.Y., in 1860 drove a horse and "buckboard buggy" from Milwaukee to Capt. Moore's farm and traded that property to Capt. Moore for a land warrant. He got 120 acres, homesteaded the adjoining 40, and bought other adjoining land until he had 400 acres. This land

subsequently came into the possession of his children and Mr. Knapp returned to his native place. He had come to Wisconsin with his family by the Great Lakes route, landing at Milwaukee and staying all winter with relations in Dodge County, driving over land to Dunn county in the spring. He was usually called "Elder Knapp," being a preacher as well as a farmer, and his experiences in both capacities, as well as in that of a hunter, were many and various and of a typical pioneer character."⁵

On October 21, 1870, the first child was born in the village limits of Colfax. Her name was Lulu Maud Culbertson. She did not remain long in Colfax after marrying Oscar Knutson in October, 1893. In October, 1893, the first person born in Colfax moved to Santa Clara, California with her husband where she became an "artist of merit."⁶

Many young men came to the Colfax area to work for the Knapp, Stout and company of Menomonie, the largest logging company in the area.

"The Knapp, Stout & Co. Company was a great help to the early settlers, buying their grain, giving them credit, so they could erect their buildings and feed their families, and helping them in many other ways. The log drive, which lasted several weeks, was always hailed with delight. One drawback, from this side of the river, was that the cattle all crossed the river for pasture, and it did not seem possible that they could go into the river among the logs and make their points on the home side at evening."⁷

As logging interests moved North, many of the families in the area turned their attention to agriculture for their income.

In 1874, the Colfax area was surveyed by Thomas Parker and associates. Colfax sits at the junction of Eighteen Mile Creek and the Red Cedar River, halfway between the equator and north pole. It is located in section 9, Township 29 north of Range 11 west. Parker worked to come up with a site plan that included two blocks consisting of eight lots each. The location of these blocks was on the northern side of 18 Mile Creek. The town would remain within this area until the coming of the railway, July 11, 1884.

"The early settlement of Colfax village was north of the creek, which location was retained until the coming of the railroad, when, the tracks having been laid some half mile south of the creek, most of the business concerns and

residences were moved over to that side, where they are today, except that the creamery, schools, a church, and about 14 or 15 houses are across the bridge to the north. The original site was mostly brush timber, except along the banks of Eighteen-Mile Creek.”⁸

Colfax soon outgrew its small survey. Now Colfax has 1,000+ residents. Parker never imagined such a size for the village of Colfax.

Most of the people that settled in Colfax were of Norwegian or American descent. Colfax would gain the reputation as being primarily a Norwegian settlement. According to the U.S. Manuscript Population Census for 1870, the population was 36% Norwegian-born, 36% Wisconsin-born, and 12% New York-born. Several other groups made up the remaining percentage. In 1870, about 2/3 of the resident children in Colfax stated that their parents were foreign-born. Eventually, the percentage of Norwegians in the community dropped as other ethnic groups moved into the area and children were born. In Colfax where the hardships required the energy and strength of youth, only 1/4 of those living in the village of Colfax were over 30 years old. In fact, less than 2% of the people were over 60 years old.⁹

Religion was a priority to the first settlers of the Colfax area. The Methodist Church, served on a circuit by Rev. William Galloway, was the first ministry that the community of Colfax had. Galloway even stayed on after lightning struck and killed one of his horses that he had left to run in James Kidd’s pasture. The church building was not built until 1902. It was dedicated in 1907. In 1864, the Colfax Lutheran Church took root in the growing community. What is now the Lutheran Church was once the Norwegian Synod Church. Bethany Lutheran Church was located in the country two miles east of town on State Highway 40. In 1941, however, they moved into town on the north side. In 1962, pastor D. P. Knapp started giving his sermons in the Methodist church that still stands in the same area today, along the railroad tracks on the north-west side of town.¹⁰

Farming and Industry

When settlers first arrived, the number of jobs available was limited. The choices for

females were significantly less than those for men. The Norwegians accounted for the majority of agricultural workers and housekeepers. Choices for women included farming and housekeeping. Jobs for men included farm workers, servants, millers, or clerical staff. Some teachers were employed in the area's schools. "Among the early school teachers mentioned by Mrs. Baldwin were Maggie Miller, Martha McCormick, Miss Belknap, Anna Chickering, Jessie Butterfield and Sarah Jame McCormick. J.R. Mathews taught school here later."¹¹

The occasional hotel would require keepers, and there were always spots in a community for merchants, grocers, wagon makers, blacksmiths, doctors, dentists, and industry workers. No open saloons were open during this time so there was no need for saloon keepers. However, there were many "blind pigs" that suggests that saloon keeping may have been a part time occupation. Farming, however, was the most common form of making a living.¹²

Among the first crops harvested in the Colfax area were rutabagas.

"Mr. Simons [1869] sowed rutabaga seed on some breaking. He had 1,400 bushels of rutabagas and they were fine. The men working in the mill had many to eat and as our town had no name, they called it Begga town. You will often hear and old settler call it Begga Town at the present time."¹³

Simons' bumper crop showed that the land of the Colfax area could easily support agriculture, especially rutabagas. In time, the production of rutabagas declined, and potatoes became the main crop. When potato farming was at its peak, the streets of Colfax would be filled with wagons loaded with the crop. On average 20 to 37 train cars of potatoes were shipped out daily. Up to 1,000 carloads of potatoes were sent out yearly for half a century. With this many potatoes, farmers often lacked space to store their crop. Sometimes, businesses, merchants and townsfolk would store the potatoes in their basements it could be shipped. Eventually, five warehouses were built to store the yearly crop of potatoes.¹⁴

Initially, potatoes were used for food or sale, but in the early 1890's the surplus potatoes were used to make starch. A starch factory was started in Colfax by A. R. Hall of River Falls. The factory paid 10-20 cents a bushel for surplus potatoes. After 10 years, the business was closed because the high price paid for potatoes made starch production unprofitable.

Early settlers had little machinery to help with harvesting or planting. Most work was

done by hand or with the help of horses and other work animals. Interestingly, tobacco, a very labor intensive crop, was grown in the Colfax area. Many farmers who moved Colfax from outside the area raised tobacco as a cash crop. The climate and soil seem to have been favorable for the crop. A sorting house measuring about 32x80 feet was constructed in 1907 and cost \$3,000 to build. John Danielson received a check for \$10,529.90 in 1918 for his crop of tobacco.¹⁵

The Higbie's farm that is north of Colfax on Highway 170 was one of the last tobacco farms in this area. The following information was gathered through an interview with them. Farmers would start by purchasing the seed, usually from the Northern Wisconsin Cooperative Tobacco Pool in Viroqua, WI. A purchase of about one ounce would be enough to plant several acres. The seed was then sprouted in a cloth bag that was kept warm and moist. This allowed the farmers to get a head start on the short growing season. After the seed had sprouted, it would be put in a sprinkler can and sprinkled into a hot bed. Once the tobacco seedlings were 6-8 inches high, they would be transplanted to the field (usually in late May or early July). The plants were hoed until they grew to a size of four to five feet high. Unfortunately, tobacco worms were often a serious problem while the plants were developing. Left unchecked, they could ruin an entire crop. Children earned spending money by picking these green worms off growing plants. They were paid 1¢ for every 10 worms.

In August, the flower stalk of the plant was cut off. Three weeks later the tobacco would be cut, speared on lathes, and hung to dry in large slatted sheds until November or December. The doors of these sheds would be opened during foggy, damp weather, also called "case weather." "Case weather" would soften the leaves and prevent them from becoming too dry and brittle. Tobacco buyers would travel to the farmer personally, usually offering between two and five cents a pound for the dried tobacco. This was a good price and led to the crop being nicknamed the "mortgage lifter." Between the 1930's and the 1950's there were over 1,000 acres of land used for farming tobacco. Gerry and George Higbie were the last tobacco farmers in Dunn County, putting in their last crop in 1967. Today, a tobacco allotment obtained from the County Ag committee is necessary to grow the crop.

Industry also grew in Colfax. John D. Simons initially built a mill and a dam on Eighteen

Mile Creek in 1869. This helped the local farmers because it eliminated the need to go to Menomonie or even to Chippewa Falls for the milling of grain. The mill was profitable from 1869 to 1880 but heavy rain often washed the dam away, causing Mr. Simons great expense. When heavy rain fell in 1880, the dam was again washed away. Repairing the dam would take a lot of time, effort, and money. In 1880, Mr. Simons, tired of rebuilding the dam, moved the mill from 18 Mile Creek to where the Stovern house is located. A newer mill was eventually built just north of the present dam. In 1870 the first Post Office was built in "Begge Town" and was managed by W. R. Culbertson who became post master. J. B. McKahan, owner of the post office, later sold out to J. D. Simons.¹⁶

The three "R's" : reading, "(w)riting", and "(a)rithmetic", were taught in Colfax not long after it was first settled. The first school, built in 1864, was a small log cabin-like structure that measured 16 by 18 feet. It was located "80 rods west of the... Methodist Episcopal Church." In 1871, the second school was built. It was 18 by 20 feet and was located near the S.D. Mathson's residence. There was only one teacher at these first schools; Margaret Miller in the first school, and Sarah Wilson in the second. In 1900, the number of students enrolled in the Colfax public school system was 127 with an average of 92 students attending daily.¹⁷

As Colfax continued to grow, businesses slowly filtered into the community. In 1873 another store, besides the one operated by Mrs. Simons in her home, opened for business in Colfax. By 1876, a third store, owned by Andrew Johnson, was opened. A barber shop opened the same year. Andrew Johnson's store later became the Kinney Mercantile Co. when he sold out to O. G. Kinney and Severin Fjelstad. The building was where the drug store is now.

Medical care was primitive by today's standards. About 1876, Eli Monteith became the first doctor in the Colfax community. By 1900 a hospital was located above the drug store that Ole Noer owned and operated. The hospital was run by L. A. Larson. This, along with a dentists office run by Hamp Bardan, allowed Colfax residents to get all the basic care they needed without having to travel to surrounding cities.¹⁸

In 1878 Colfax had a wide variety of businesses and churches start serving the community. Running Valley Lutheran Free Church opened its doors to the community during that year. Mrs. Montieth was the music instructor. David Philander, a farmer and preacher,

established himself here in 1878 also. A blacksmith shop run by Halver Erickson, a barbershop run by Thomas Leach, and two storekeepers, Running and J. E. Mathews also did business in Colfax. W. R. Culbertson served as the postmaster at this time.¹⁹

In 1884, the Wisconsin Central Railway reached Colfax. The Minneapolis, St. Paul & Sault Ste. Marie Railway, usually referred to as the "Soo," leased the railway in 1911 for 99 years. Faster, more economical travel and shipping of goods was now possible. Farmers could now send their goods to markets outside the Colfax area.²⁰

Around 1894 Mr. Simons sold the dam property to James Anderson of Dallas, WI. Mr. Anderson rafted and floated lumber down the Red Cedar River to Colfax. At Colfax, Mr. Anderson cut the lumber into wooden planks at his saw mill. The planks were used to build new buildings and a different dam. In a few years, there would be two lumberyards in Colfax. The Colfax Messenger newspaper was founded thirteen years later in April of 1897 by Andrew Chase. This would provide the people of Colfax with community news and would later provide an excellent source for historical information for the Colfax community!²¹

Money found its first safe place in 1899 when Colfax's first bank, the Bank of Colfax, was opened. It was a private bank that was set up by George D. Bartlett and G.T. Vorland until it was incorporated in July of 1903. Bartlett became the president. In 1915, the Peoples State Bank was founded. W. W. Mathews was this bank's first president. The library was also started in 1899 by the Reading Club which eventually became the Women's Club.²²

In 1900, the Colfax Stone Company began its operation one mile west of town. It was owned by John Peterson, a Madison resident. It was started by William Lister of Maiden Rock, WI. Many buildings in Colfax owe their beautiful stone exteriors to the quarry. These buildings include the Colfax Municipal Building, Colfax Lutheran Church, Colfax Railroad Depot, Commercial Testing Lab (formerly a bank), and the Colfax Farmers Store (now the furniture store). The Luther Memorial Church of Madison was built completely of this Colfax sandstone. Some believe that the stone quarried here was some of the finest stone in the area.²³

When it was operating at its peak, there were three pits, each about ½ city block long, used to quarry the rock. Quarriers used steel saws resembling crosscut saws to cut the stone into blocks measuring about 10ft. x 3ft. x 3ft. Over thirty railroad cars were used to transport the

stone. Besides providing the construction material for buildings, the stone was a carving medium for Klaus Karlson. He carved a seven foot statue of Jesus Christ for a cathedral that is said to be in either in St. Paul or Chicago. The company was later consolidated with the firm of Flicroft & Thompson and the D. K. Hardware Store and is a big reason for the early growth of Colfax. The Colfax Cement Blockworks, owned by Oluf Olson, started operation not long afterwards in 1902.²⁴

By 1901 Colfax had six general stores, including one owned by Ole. G. Kinney. There were two hardware stores, one drug store, two blacksmith shops, two barber shops, and two tin shops. The drug store was owned by Ole Noer, a licensed pharmacist. His store also stocked clothing and footwear (Juul Noer later took over the drug store business). One of the blacksmith shops was operated by Austin C. Rude. (In June, 1921 he was working together with John Iverson in a shop measuring 38 x 50 feet.) Visitors in Colfax had the option of staying in one of the three local hotels. Two doctors and one veterinary surgeon served the Colfax community.²⁵

In 1903, the Colfax Telephone Exchange started operation thanks to the efforts if Oscar I. Anderson. It allowed the residents of Colfax to communicate with those inside and outside the town. In 1904 Colfax was incorporated. It was named after Schuyler Colfax, the vice president of the United States from 1869-1873 under U.S. Grant. Colfax's first mayor was G. T. Vorland. He served several terms throughout the early years of Colfax. In 1905, the Colfax Creamery Company began operation. It provided a place where farmers could have their dairy products processed locally. Farmer's meat would be processed in one of the towns two butcher shops. Colfax also had a jewelry store, two furniture stores, a wagon shop and three confectionary stores. An undertaker was also in business in town. At this time the population of Colfax was barely over 400!²⁶

In 1914 a village band was organized under the leadership of Dr. L. A. Larsen. G. Hammer began showing silent movies in the Municipal Building in 1915, providing a new form of entertainment for the villagers. One year later, in 1916, the Boy Scouts was organized and D. J. Toycen was the first scout master. Girl Scouts was not organized until 1930.²⁷

In 1918, the founder of Colfax, John D. Simons, died due to injuries sustained during an auto accident. He had left Colfax nine years earlier to travel to Washington. Planning to explore

the lands he was now interested in, Simons pursued business enterprises there. Alvin Running announced the death at Bellingham, Washington. Even after leaving, Simons had visited Colfax annually. He was 83 years old.

As the town continued to develop, different agricultural industries began to spring up. One of them was the pickle industry. Cucumbers grown around Colfax were taken to the pickle factory owned by Fame Canning Co. of Three Oaks Michigan. It started operation in 1922. The canning company operated in Colfax for three years before selling out to the Reid Murdock & Co. Many people took advantage of this industry and grew cucumbers to earn extra money for a college education or Christmas. By 1964, a different, more modern time-saving method was used to process the dill size cucumbers.²⁸

In 1932, Colfax sent off a member of the community to Lake Placid, New York. Lloyd Ellingson had been selected to represent the United States as of member of the Olympic team from February third to the thirteenth. On August 25, 1936 the Peoples State Bank was robbed by a "lone bandit" that made away with a total of \$2,408.00. There was a large celebration on May 15, 1939 when the people of Colfax recognized the 100th birthday of Ebert Sorkness, a Civil War Veteran. Sorkness died shortly after the celebration at the age of 100 years, eight months. Also in 1939, Colfax was the host to 15,000 people at the closing of the Colfax Free Fair. There were "registrants from 81 cities and ten states."²⁹

In the 1940's, the second World War broke open and the United States was not long in becoming involved in the worldwide conflict. Men from all over the nation, including Colfax, went to serve their country overseas. The following is a list of those from the Colfax community that made the ultimate sacrifice for their country during World War II:

Morriss Waite	Phillip Baldrige	Lester Berg
James W. Frazl	Edwin Frogner	Arnold Melgaard
Hiram Knutson	Victor Olson	Paul Peterson
Robert Russel	Jerome Swartz	Orin Semington
Torgrin Teppen	Earl Thompson	Dermont Toycen, Jr.
Kenneth Winget	Alfred Madison	Layton Knutson

Bernard Scovell

Eilert Isakson

The following is a list of those that gave their life in the earlier World War I:

Theodore Anderson	Hedley Sundstrom	Gustof Stenerson
Herman Fruvog	Oscar Olson	Lloyd Howe
Otto Knutson	Oscar Anderson	Herman Jackson
Barney Peterson	Alfred Mickleson	
Orrin Russell	Leonard Jackson	

Many more served their country during this war and also the previous, World War I. A complete list may exist of all those that served, but in order to omit no name, a recognition and thank you is extended to all those who spent their time serving the United States during World War I and II.³⁰

In 1942 Rock Peterson's egg grading station opened, providing a place where farmers could get their eggs graded and shipped to various markets for a "fair price." The Spring Valley Produce Co. purchased the Everson Building and the egg grading station in 1945. During World War II the government purchased the majority of the eggs for those in the armed forces. At its peak production, 500 cases of eggs a week were shipped from the factory. Farmers would receive between thirty-five and fifty-five cents a dozen. Farmers from as far away as 30 miles came to sell their eggs. In 1956, the business was forced to close because of larger, more efficient competition.³¹

In 1964, the community celebrated its centennial anniversary of its settlement. The men of the community were asked to grow beards or mustaches and the women to wear long dresses to remember the "old times." There was a parade and a small fair at the park during this celebration. A centennial booklet was published and was dedicated as follows:

WE SHALL ALWAYS REMEMBER...

The men and women who came from far and near to help us recover from the most devastating disaster in the history of Colfax--the tornado of 1958;

Those who brought food, and the many women's groups who served the

55,000 meals to the homeless survivors and the volunteer workers;

Those who sent clothing to be distributed to survivors who had lost their all;

Those who came to help with the physical work of picking up the debris and clearing our streets for traffic;

Those who furnished chain saws, trucks and other equipment with which to work;

The ham radio operators who sent and received messages to and from our relatives and friends;

Those who helped us with their cash donations.

The National Guard, The Red Cross, and The Salvation Army, whose personnel helped us in their capacities.

And those who could not help, but remembered us in their prayers and messages of encouragement.

All these gave us courage and faith to carry on. To them we are most grateful, and dedicate this booklet.

President Lyndon B. Johnson even gave recognition to the small, but growing community. The following is a telegram that he sent from the White House on July 8, 1964:

Donald P. Rice and Perley Entzminger
Co-Chairmen Colfax Centennial

Colfax, Wisconsin

I have learned with much pleasure that the village of Colfax, Wis. is observing this year the centennial anniversary of its settlement. As you turn this significant page in the colorful history of your town Mrs. Johnson and I extend to all the citizens of Colfax our heartiest greeting and congratulations. May the years ahead bring continued progress and prosperity to your growing community.

Lyndon B. Johnson³²

The Disasters

In its beginning years, the Colfax area was not without its problems. Many early events or disasters can be attributed to Mother Nature! On July 6, 1855, floodwaters caused by a 30 hour storm covered much of the area, washing away 70,000 logs rafted together near Chippewa Falls. In 1873 numerous reports of roving wolf packs stirred many concerns. On Jan. 21, 1884, temperatures near Menomonie reached -54°F. Ten months later, Sept. 10, 1884, flood waters caused over 4 million dollars of damage throughout the Chippewa Valley. Temperatures reached all time lows in the winter of 1888 when the mercury bottomed out at -68°F on Jan. 23 near Chippewa Falls. One-hundred-nineteen people died in the New Richmond area when a tornado swept the area in 1899. Blizzards hit the winter of 1917-1918.³³

On June 7, 1905 the Red Cedar River's water level was unusually high due to recent storms. The water was so high that it weakened the train bridge west of Colfax. A train approached the bridge, but stopped before crossing to let the passengers off. The passengers were told they would need to cross the bridge by foot and the train would cross empty. The bridge twisted and gave way as the train crossed, tossing it into the water below. Two railmen and a sleeping tramp were killed when the train tumbled into the water. The Dunn County News Reported the following:

Passenger train No. 2, east bound on the Wisconsin Central road, due at Colfax at 11:14 Wednesday, plunged into the Red Cedar River one mile west of Colfax and Engineer George Phipps, Fireman Severance and a tramp who was riding on the blind baggage were drowned. The baggage man saved his life by crawling through a window as his car was sinking and the mail agent escaped by climbing through a hole in the top of his car and was rescued from the flood.

The train in charge of Conductor Hayes approached the bridge slowly and as everything appeared to be all right, attempted to cross. It appears that the center pier had been undermined by high water and as the engine reached the center of the bridge, the structure gave away and precipitated the engine, tender, baggage and mail cars into the river. The engine turned over in going down and went completely out of sight in the water. The front end of the smoking car went down into water and the car remained standing in a vertical position. The occupants were badly shaken up and many were bruised but none were fatally injured. The balance of the train remained on the track and was returned to St. Paul and was sent over the Omaha.

None of the passengers were injured.

Search was immediately instituted for bodies of the unfortunate engineer and fireman but at last reports they had not been found and it is believed the high water has washed them some distance down the river.

This accident will seriously interfere with traffic on the Wisconsin Central between Chippewa Falls and St. Paul. It is understood a temporary foot bridge will be built at once for the transfer of passengers but freight cannot be handled in this way and the construction of a new bridge will require several days. Meantime, the freight will be handled over the Omaha.³⁴

In 1934 an even larger flood hit Colfax. Its destruction paled that of the flood of 1905. Its damage affected the town itself. The bridge that connected the northern and southern parts of town was swept away by the powerful flood waters. It also destroyed the town's only feed mill that sat along the south end of the bridge. Because of this, the citizens of Colfax had to turn elsewhere to process their grain. The service station, another key business, was a "casualty" of the flood too. The damage was a small setback, but the town rebounded.³⁵

Armistice Day 1940, a different kind of "disaster" occurred, a blizzard. The following is a story that was recounted to Josh Rose by Geoffrey Dobbs:

It was Veteran's Day 1940 when the unexpected storm hit. It was later called the Armistice Day Snowstorm. The storm came up unexpectedly and caught many off guard. It was duck hunting season and there were a lot of people out trying to bag their catch on that day. A little ways from Colfax, on Tainter Lake, there was a duck hunter with his dog. The storm came up so quickly that the two were unable to reach any adequate shelter before they froze to death. When spring arrived, the two were found frozen near the lake. The dog and man were laying side by side. During the long winter, some mice had nibbled at the ears of the two and by spring, the ears had been completely eaten off.

The snow also created problems for transportation for heavy animals and vehicles. The snow was so high that a fourteen-foot tall milk truck could not be seen from the road. School children could ski to school and glide over fences because the snow was so high. After the snow had settled, it formed a crust so strong that horses could walk on top without breaking through. Winters were harsher then, according to those who experienced them. Snow drifts were often as high as the gutters on a one-story home. Snow plows would leave "mountains" of snow along

the road that would block your view of houses from the road.³⁷

If there is one thing that sticks out in the history of Colfax, it is the tornado of 1958. It was a disaster that few expected and everyone wishes will never happen again. This disaster demonstrates how quickly a community can come together to help each other. (This was not the first tornado to hit this area. On June 3, 1930 a tornado killed five near Menomonie. Not long after, on June 8, 1933, a tornado hit doing a moderate amount of damage, however, it did not receive as much publicity as the tornado of 1958.)³⁷

It was a hot sunny day June 4, 1958. The day was not too unusual, although it was warmer than expected. In the afternoon, the sky began hinting that the evening's weather might not be the most pleasant. Most people thought that the darkening clouds only meant rain. Between five or five thirty in the afternoon the sky grew very, very black as thunder began to roll in the distance. Then the rain began. It started as a light rain and quickly grew into a torrential downpour. The rain plummeted to the ground in what seemed to be solid walls of water. Those who were driving in the area found it extremely difficult to see the roads, but they feared that if they slowed down too much that they might be rear-ended by someone who could not see them stopped in the road.³⁸

The following story, told by Harold Olson, recalls the hours and minutes that passed before the disaster hit:

“On the day that the storm hit, I was working on installing a water main near the park. The water main was going from the entry of the park to the east. We [the construction team] had been working there for most of day. Then all at once it started to cloud up and it got real dark. We realized that it was more than just a little bit of rain coming so I told the guys that we could quit. The equipment was shut down and everything was prepared so that we could leave.

“It got darker and darker and I thought that I should beat it for home so I [did]. Orpha [his wife] was at home at the time. Then I took the pickup and ran down the street to see what the weather looked like. I had never seen it like that before. When I came back it started to pour. Then I pulled the pickup into the

driveway and I thought that I could sit it out in the truck. It kept raining though, so I opened the door of the pickup and ran in the house. I said to Orpha that I was going to go down the basement to close the window because it was open. I told her to close the windows upstairs in the house.

“I got down the basement and I looked outside and saw the trees in the yard. We had a lot of great big trees in our yard. They were laying flat to the ground. They were maple trees, most of them, and they were fifty to sixty feet tall. I hollered to Orpha to come down [into the basement] as fast as she could and she came down with Beckie and Bruce [their children]. We went into a little area under the stairs. Just about that time the storm hit the house. I heard a bang and I didn't know what it was. I raised my head once or twice and looked out the window and saw that the house across the street was gone. We just held the kids as tight as we could.

“It quit all of a sudden and then all was quiet. When we got upstairs we saw that the big high line pole was sticking half-ways into the kitchen. It came in the door and all the wires were all over. I had to crawl through the wires to get outside. When I got outside I saw that a lot of the buildings were gone... I went down to the south side of the town and picked up some of the injured people. There were no buildings left. A guy was laying across the street at the edge of a field. He was dead. We took several people down to the auditorium where there were some doctors.

“Donald Fjelstad's boy was working for Dan Emerton and it was his first day. When the storm came he was in the barn and he went for what he thought was the safest place, the stone silo. The tornado took the silo and killed the boy. It was an awful night. Not many went to sleep that night.”

There are different times given for when the tornado hit the town of Colfax. 7:07 p.m. is probably the most accurate. It was at this time that a clock stopped at one of the houses hit by the tornado. The tornado entered the village along State Highway 40 and tore into the south end of

town. When it entered it was said to have sounded like a roaring train.

In Colfax, sixty buildings were destroyed. Many more homes were damaged and ruined. In all, twelve people were killed in Colfax alone. There were twenty-nine people killed in the five counties hit by the tornado. Injuries were prevalent and ranged from minor to severe. Dr. O.M. Felland reported in an article written for the publication *Lancet* that there were sixty severely injured and fifty who suffered minor injuries. Sacred Heart and Luther Hospital of Eau Claire, Stanley Memorial Hospital, Memorial Hospital of Menomonie, and St. Joseph's Hospital of Chippewa Falls all helped to treat those injured in the tornado. However, not only doctors helped out in the situation. Dr. G. J. Neuman, the village dentist, and a local veterinarian Dr. John Thomas both lent their services to the people that came to the Colfax auditorium (presently the Colfax Public Library) for aide. Doctor Felland started to treat the patients in his own office but soon realized that the growing numbers of patients would overcrowd even his large office space. The clinic was then moved to the basement of the Colfax Auditorium where the public library now stands.³⁹

Right after the storm, the main concern for most people was to help the injured that they could find. Ambulances and doctors needed to be brought in from the surrounding cities. It was soon apparent that it would not be easy to reach anyone because the tornado had downed the telephone lines, cutting off all communication for the people of Colfax. It was Police Chief Herbert Ziebell that finally got through to Menomonie using his police radio. He asked for ambulances and station wagons to be sent along with doctors to aide the wounded.⁴⁰

Word traveled fast that the devastating tornado had struck Colfax, destroying much of the town. Relatives and friends from all over the United States and the world soon heard of the disaster. Within hours, many family members were trying to contact their loved ones, but without success. Telephone lines were down throughout Colfax. The only sources of information were the news reports and rumors that seemed to create unnecessary worry for many families. It was said that "not being in Colfax was almost worse than [the] tornado." The following are excerpts from a letter sent to Mr. and Mrs. A.R. Bronken from Anita Matthew (their daughter) and reprinted in the *25th Anniversary of the Colfax Tornado* issue of the Colfax Messenger:

“Today I am numb with relief and exhaustion. Thank God you were all spared... At 7:30 [the day after the tornado] I looked over our morning paper at the breakfast table spotting a small, little, inaccurate account [of the tornado] in the lower right hand corner...Needless to say, I was concerned, but not worried... Marge Upson called from Stratford to find out if I had heard the news. She had heard that Colfax was leveled.

“Then I really got panicky and put in a call to Colfax. The operator, of course, could not get through, but I told her it was an emergency... About 9 a.m. I got a call from Rev. Boe. He had called some minister in Eau Claire and had some information, but lots of misinformation. He knew the church was standing so I was heartened over the prospects for our house. He knew that most of the dead were creamery workers. He said that the storm hit from the creamery to the Farmers Store, so I imagined the Main Street was leveled. He also had in an emergency call and would call me back as soon as he got through...

“From 6 to 7:15 p.m. I watched all the TV news and saw pictures of Colfax that I couldn't even recognize... All day long I keep changing from chattering with the cold or perspiring from nervousness. This had nothing to do with the weather which was quite pleasant.”⁴¹

Local ham radio operators helped in the communication efforts between families and their loved ones. The Dunn County Radio Club handled messages from family and concerned friends for two weeks. After a few days, telephone service was not restored. The few lines that were partially restored were constantly busy with relatives and friends trying to reach the residents.⁴²

Aide came from all areas after the storm dealt its destructive blow. Some of the first aide came from the people of the community that went to help those who had suffered the worst in the storm. Cleanup efforts went on for weeks after the tornado hit. Men with chain-saws cut down damaged trees and families cleaned up the mess of debris that the swirling winds had thrown

everywhere. Trying to find valuables was sometimes a lost cause. Pictures, jewelry, and other small items of value were often never found again. Not long after the storm, clothing and food began to come in. In all, fifty tons of clothing were donated from many communities. The old school gymnasium was used as the distribution center for donated clothing. However, when school neared, the center was moved to the basement of the Auditorium. Some of the clothing, especially the over-worn wool items, were sent to a wool mill to make batts for quilts. Many women worked long hours at the tedious task of removing buttons and zippers and linings from the wool clothing that had been donated. When the clothing was ready, it was shipped to a woolen mill in Minnesota to be processed. After it was returned, the women bought material and spent countless hours making quilts for the families of Colfax. The blankets were delivered that Fall.

Because there was an estimated \$1,630,000 damage total in the Colfax area, funds were set up by local cities to aide the reconstruction of the village. People from many surrounding cities donated various amounts of money to the relief funds. In the first day after the tornado, Eau Claire radio stations raised \$11,000 and newspapers in the Twin Cities (the St. Paul Pioneer Press and Dispatch) raised a total of \$10,000 by June 11, 1958. Food was also donated and had to be kept in a refrigerated truck because there was no electricity in Colfax for several days following the storm. The Salvation Army and the Red Cross came in shortly after the tornado to held aide the injured and needy. They donated supplies and set up a food kitchen in the Lutheran Church that fed all those who needed to be fed. The food service workers stayed from 4 a.m. to 9 p.m. and, over the relief period, served 54,000 meals.⁴³

Another source of help came from the Mobile Homes Manufacturers Association. They donated mobile homes for twenty-five families. These trailers helped the people of Colfax get back on their feet and start the process of rebuilding. The Olsons were one of the families that lived in a trailer provided by MHMA while they rebuilt their home. The details that follow come from the perspective of Beckie (Olson) Hagen who was four at the time.

“We were loaned a one bedroom trailer house that was parked in the lot beside our house. My first cousins stayed with us because both of their parents

were in the hospital. The trailer had one double bed in the bedroom and a pull-out couch in the living room. Because there were six of us my dad, brother, and one cousin shared the bed in the bedroom while my mother, my other cousin, and myself shared the pull-out couch.

“I remember that the couch pulled out to the cupboards and sink so you could have almost washed the dishes from the couch. The bathroom was quite a bit smaller than most of us were used to. It was like a small box . Through the eyes of a four year-old, I found living in a new “house” to be an adventure. Until we finished repairing our house, the trailer was very helpful.”⁴⁴

During the whole period of reconstructing and helping others, people really came together. “Such catastrophes bring out the best in people. The abundance of love, kindness and generosity are helping mend the gaping wounds opened by nature and all its fury.” People helped others clean their up yards from the debris that the storm had strewn all over the community.

Many people have told stories about the looting that went on after the tornado hit. It was only after a few hours that people from surrounding cities began looting the town. The National Guard was called in to block off the town and keep unnecessary onlookers out of the area. A lot of people came and roamed through the wreckage. The National Guard tried to keep as many people out as possible.

The following is a list of those who sustained fatal injuries during the tornado: Lanny and Spencer Fjelstad, Richard Presnell, Nora Gerber, Mrs. Theodore Slaga, Erling and Leon Lunn, Mrs. Rolf Lunn, George Nelson, William Wagner, Arthur Quevillon, Vernon Meidel, and George Nilsen.⁴⁸

For all we know, the great Colfax tornado might not be the last that our community ever sees. In the meantime, however, family members will remember their loss. Those who lived through the tornado will never waste any time going to the basement when bad weather hits.

From Then to Today

Colfax's face has been changing a lot since the tornado. New businesses have come and gone. The original dam built by Simons in the late 1800's was destroyed in a flood in the 1930's. The present dam, built in the 1950's, is in the process of being removed. Mirror Lake, the body of water behind the dam, will again flow as 18 Mile Creek into the Red Cedar River. 18 Mile Creek is being restructured by the DNR. This decision was the object of a referendum vote. Because of the cost of repairing the dam, the community voted for demolition of the dam. Not all of the dam will be removed, only parts. Portions will remain to help hold the bank in place. There is an estimated 10- 12 feet of sediment that has collected over the years. When the dam is removed, it is believed that up to 23,000 cubic yards of sediment may be let loose into the Red Cedar. The DNR has constructed sediment traps to prevent this from happening. Once the 18 Mile Creek is reestablished, the DNR and Trout Unlimited will be working to create a positive habitat for trout and other fish.

The muddy bottom of the creek will soon be restored to the natural gravel bottom that trout flourish in. It will not be cheap, however. The project will cost an estimated \$750,000 (including the sediment trap, stream restructuring (\$400,000), and the dam removal) which is more than the cost of repairing the dam and dredging the bottom. When the stream is ready, fingerling trout will be stocked by the DNR. The DNR will also pay for the expenses of servicing the sediment trap for approximately a year after the dam is removed. It is hoped that the stream will be a functioning trout stream by 1999. The plan was originally to cost approximately \$325,000 which will be paid by a government grant and the village of Colfax.

In addition to the dam, Colfax recently had a new housing development constructed. It is located on the south end of town, next to the Car Wash. The IGA, Colfax's only grocery store at this time, also recently moved from the downtown area to the southern end of town. It now sits next to the Bremer bank.

Weather disasters are not only part of the distant past of Colfax. Twice during the week of July 9th, 1997, the residents of Colfax heard the sounds of storm sirens as severe weather moved across Dunn County. Although the village itself escaped almost free of damage, the outskirts of town had moderate damage on July 2nd. High winds had knocked down large areas of trees and some power lines the night before. Rural electric crews toiled much of the day to restore power to homes and farms. Several funnel clouds were sighted in the Menomonie and Colfax area but went by without confirmed touchdowns. On July 5th, a second tornado warning was sounded because of funnel cloud sightings. At the Viking Bowl, in Colfax, the entryway roof and antenna were blown down. The National Weather Service reported that the tornado dissipated near the southern edge of Eau Claire.

The future of Colfax may hold a many different things, what we can imagine is only speculation. Colfax's population will probably continue to grow at a slow, but steady rate. The newer school and community size are attracting people who wish to raise their kids in a small community but need to be close to a larger city such as Eau Claire or Menomonie. Large industry will most likely continue to be confined to larger surrounding cities, but small businesses will probably continue filtering in and out.

Although the history that you just read is not, by any means, a complete overview of everything that happened, it is a brief story containing many of the major points of Colfax's past.

Hopefully it has provided you with some interesting information about Colfax, as well as, the people that have lived and continue to live here.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

The authors of this booklet are all members of the 1997 Wisconsin History Class. These students are all Juniors and have spent time researching and putting together the booklet that you just read. We hope you found it informative. This booklet, however, is not a complete record of all that happened during the history of Colfax. For those who wish to learn more, there are sources available including those in the Public Library. The following authors have contributed either to the booklet itself or the movie that accompanies it.

Jordan Albright- Born May 23, 1981, this sixteen-year-old lives on the family farm. He enjoys riding motocross, snowmobiling, playing baseball, and “whatever else is fun.”

Vicki Behling- Vicki’s interests run the gamut from auto racing to collecting Walt Disney memorabilia. She is involved in National Honor Society, Future Homemakers of America, Future Business Leaders of America, and serves as co-editor of Yearbook. She is also in volleyball, softball, and plays flute in band.

Phillip Durstein- Phillip enjoys spending his spare time at home riding four-wheeler and breaking new trails in the woods. He lives and works on the family farm. His future plans are pointing in the direction of ATV or snowmobile mechanics.

Justin Faust- Justin enjoys riding motorcycle, four-wheelers, and raising beef cattle as a hobby. Welding and woodworking also interests Justin. After high school, he plans to be an engineer or a technical education teacher.

Matthew Flatland- In his spare time, Matt enjoys hunting, riding dirt bike, snowmobiling, and spending money on cars. He sees tech school in his future for autobody, heavy machine operating, or similar fields.

Derek Grant- Derek has had an opportunity to see what school outside of Colfax is like. The opportunity affirmed that Derek would continue attending Colfax, where he plans to spend the rest of his life. He enjoys riding dirt bike and four-wheelers.

Joshua Hagen- Josh spends a lot of time involved in school and extra-curricular activities. He is president of the Future Business Leaders of America, a member-at-large of Student Council, a member of national Honor Society, senior Editor of the Yearbook, and is involved in Forensics. He enjoys reading, painting, and woodworking when time permits. He plans on becoming an architect or mechanical engineer.

Joshua Harlson- Josh has lived in the Ridgeland area all of his life, but attends Colfax school. He enjoys riding snowmobile, driving cars, hunting, and riding motorbike.

Guy Haseltine Jr.- Guy has spent most of his life in Colfax except for 9th, 10th, and part of 11th grade during which he lived in Bloomer. He plays football, baseball, and is involved in track, lifts weights, and likes music. He is planning on going to tech school for carpentry.

Aaron T. Knutson- Aaron lives with what you could almost consider a “zoo.” Between school and caring for twenty horses, three cows, a kangaroo, two emus, fifteen chickens, two dogs, two cats, and two pigs, Aaron finds time to ride and race dirt bike and play high school football.

Bill Lansin- Bill enjoys Wisconsin History because of the things he’s learned. He spends his time playing football at school at the positions of left guard and nose tackle. He also enjoys searching for the elusive “big one” during the hunting season.

Amy Lee- Sixteen-year-old Amy lives in Wheeler and goes to school in Colfax. She says this project has taught her a lot about teamwork as she dug for information with other group members. Her most special relationship is with her grandmother.

Joshua Rose- Josh spends a lot of his time during fall and spring playing football and baseball. Any type of outdoor activity such as fishing or hunting are of interest to him. His future is uncertain, but he plans on attending college.

Erin Seever- Erin has lived in Colfax most of her life except during 8th-10th grade and part of 11th grade. She enjoys skateboarding and doing artwork. Because of her love for kids, she would like to become a child psychologist after graduating.

Thank you to all who spent the time to read and hopefully enjoy our booklet. We hope that it has been of some help as you try to learn more about the history of Colfax.

We would like to thank the following people for contributing to the making of this booklet by giving information and pictures that we were able to use:

Juul Noer- for the use of his family scrapbook and news clippings

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Mr. Weber's last hour Middle School study hall that sorted and sorted through pictures and materials.

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