THE HISTORY OF MOUNT HOREB

PART ONE: THE EARLIEST YEARS
by Mrs. M. M. Darrow

PIONEER BACKGROUND
The very earliest history of Mt. Horeb is, of course, interwoven with the early days of Blue Mounds Township. It was the lead mining boom of southern Wisconsin that brought Ebenezer Brigham from Galena to Dane County in 1828. Mr. Brigham "struck it rich" in the Blue Mounds area, and so became the first permanent white settler in Dane County. His cabin was soon serving as a tavern or inn for travelers, and a small settlement began to spring up around it.

One of the earlier post offices of the state was established in Brigham's home and was known as Moundville. Even Milwaukee and Madison did not have post offices at that time. In 1836 the first school in Dane County was opened in the Brigham settlement.

It was the need for another post office, one to serve the eastern part of the township, which was to bring Mt. Horeb into existence. But, first, let us look briefly at the exact site in that frontier country on which our village would eventually stand.

MT. HOREB'S SITE
Indians almost certainly roamed this area, drawn by the clear streams and game-filled woods. But the earliest records tell us only that James Morrison came here in 1849 and purchased from the government a large tract of land which is the present site of most of the village. About 1850 Granville Neale purchased part of this property. Later Mr. Neale sold his land to Ole Peterson (father of Olaf Peterson) and to Carl Boeck (father of Mrs. Andrew Hoff). Mr. Peterson's land extended from Grove Street to our present city limits on the west. Mr. Boeck's land was east of Grove Street to Springdale Street. Both farms extended north and south to our present city limits.

Nathan H. Dryden, another early settler, came during the 1850's, purchasing land that lay east of our present North and South Eighth Streets. The Dryden farm home was a few feet east of the present railroad overhead bridge, on the north side of the road in the old town. Our Union and Lutheran cemetery grounds were once a part of the Dryden farm.

A deed dated January 12, 1851, shows that James Morrison deeded land to Elisha A. and Charles Carver. In 1864 the Carvers sold their land to Richard Lowe (father of Amos Lowe and grandfather of Moses Lowe). This land was east of Springdale Street to Eighth Street and extended north and south to present city limits.

Most of these early settlers were English; a few were Scotch, Irish, and German. Many came from the eastern part of the United States, some from Tennessee, Alabama, Illinois and Ohio. There were few Norwegians in the area before 1870.

GEORGE WRIGHT NAMES MT. HOREB
During these early years the Blue Mounds Township post office was in the home of Ebenezer Brigham, one of the first settlers in the area. Somewhat later it was moved to the combination farm home and store of Frank Brackenwagon. This location, known as "Brackenwagon's Corner", was about a mile west of our present Mt. Horeb at the intersection of U. S. Highway 151.
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The Blue Mounds Township was quickly settled, and it became apparent that there was need of another post office, one for the convenience of the settlers in the eastern part of the township. In 1861, therefore, a new post office was established in the farm home of George Wright, a lay minister of the Methodist Episcopal Church.

Mr. Wright was born in England in 1824, emigrating to America in 1849. In 1858 he brought his family from Springdale Township to Blue Mounds Township. He was highly regarded in the community and served as town treasurer; he also served a term in the Wisconsin State Legislature and was assistant provost marshal during the Civil War.

His farm, in which the new post office had been established, was about a mile and a half northeast of today’s Mt. Horeb, on the old “Military Road”. (The present owner is Elmer H. Conley, and the old “Military Road” is now called the Pine Bluff or Mineral Point Road).

Mr. Wright, as postmaster, was given the privilege of naming the new post office, and he selected the Biblical name of “Mount Horeb”. Very possibly the high elevation of his farm and the surrounding area influenced his choice. To date there is only one post office in the United States so named.

In 1867 the post office was moved a mile and a half away from Mr. Wright’s farm to a tiny crossroads settlement near our present Union Cemetery. This settlement had until then been called “The Corners”. But it now began to be known as “Horeb’s Corners” and later as Mt. Horeb.

Although “Horeb”, “Mount of Horeb” and “Horeb the Mount of God” are frequently mentioned in the Old Testament, only a few references will be listed here. The second book in the Bible, Exodus, has the first mention of Horeb (Exodus 3:1; also 17-6; 33-6). Others are: Deuteronomy 1-2; 1-6; 1-19; 4-10; 5-2; 9-8; 18-16; 1 Kings 8-9; 19-8; Psalms 106-19; Malachi 4-4.

Early Churches

In 1848 a Presbyterian church was built just inside the southwest entrance to the present cemetery. It remained there until about 1866 when it was sold, moved to the opposite corner known later as “Gunderson Parsonage” lot, and converted to a store building. By that time the Methodists had built a church, and the few remaining Presbyterians united with the Methodists. They bought a one-half interest in the Methodist Church, and although it was sometimes thereafter referred to as “Union Church”, it remained under the jurisdiction of the Methodist conference.

The Methodist Episcopal Church was organized November 7, 1854, by Rev. J. T. Pryor and was attached to the Black Earth Circuit. The meetings were held in homes and possibly part of the time in the Presbyterian Church.

In 1866 the Methodists built their church in the northwest corner of the present cemetery on land deeded to them by Nathan H. Dryden.

“OLD TOWN” MT. HOREB

Toward the close of the Civil War the small crossroad settlement called “The Corners” had gradually established itself near the present Union Cemetery. Today we refer to it as the “old town”. The early settlers called it “The Corners” because it stood at the intersection of the roads from Black Earth (joined a mile back by the old “Military Road”), Verona, Mt. Vernon and Blue Mounds.

Here, during the period from 1848 to 1881, were to appear the homes, churches and business places that formed the nucleus of the future Mt. Horeb.

Methodist Church Built in 1866

The church basement served as a community center for the settlement and surrounding area. Here classes met until a new school house had been erected, business and civic groups held their meetings, and a weekly singing school was conducted by Ben F. Rogers, an organ salesman and singing master. After the close of the Civil War a night school for returned veterans was held in the basement, with Prescott Woodbury as teacher. Mr. Woodbury’s sister, Hattie Woodbury, was also a teacher in the old town.

Schools

The first school in the old town stood on the west side of North Eighth Street (near the present Harold Nygard property). Due to the growth of the community, a new school was built in
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1875 on a lot purchased from Nathan H. Dryden just west of the railroad bridge on the north side of the road.

Business Establishments

1866—George Barrows

The first business place established at The Corners was a store opened in 1866 by George Barrows. It stood on the "Gunderson Parsonage" lot at today’s Springdale and Eighth Streets. In January, 1867, Mr. Barrows succeeded George Wright as postmaster of the Mt. Horeb post office, and the office was moved to the Barrows’ store at The Corners.

Mr. Barrows was born in Canada. He served with the Union Army during the Civil War and was seriously wounded. As a result of that injury he was not able to farm, so went into the mercantile business. Mr. Barrows did not stay here long, as we find he sold out to John Mitchell in 1867.

1867—William Bunnell

In 1867 William Bunnell opened the first blacksmith shop at Horeb’s Corners. It was erected on the northeast corner of today’s Springdale and North Eighth Streets, directly across the road from the Barrows’ store.

1867—John Mitchell

John Mitchell became postmaster on September 24, 1867, after having purchased the Barrows’ store. He was born in Scotland in 1815 and came to Blue Mounds Township in 1853. He owned the farm now known as the Aslakson...
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farm, and was one of the first school teachers in
the old town. In the fall of 1871 Mr. Mitchell
sold out to Andrew Levordson, who also suc-
cceeded him as postmaster.

Norwegian Settlers Arrive

The year 1871 marks the beginning of the
change in the development of Mt. Horeb. With
the coming of Andrew Levordson other Nor-
wegians became interested in the village which
they called “Staage” or “Stangjii”, a dialect
name for Liberty Pole. This name was given to
it because of a flag pole which had been erected
in the cemetery as an act of patriotism during
the Civil War. The Norwegians brought with
them such traditions as lutefisk, rosemaling, and
Sytte Mai—their day of independence.

1872—Paul Sletto

In 1872 another Norwegian, Paul Sletto, who
had been a cobbler in Dodgeville, opened a boot
and shoe business in the old town.

1872—Samuel Thompson

Samuel Thompson came to the old town in
1872, purchasing the blacksmith shop and resi-
dence of William Bunnell. He was born in Nor-
way, emigrating to this country in 1861.

1873—Torgrim Fjeld

Early in 1873 Torgrim Fjeld (later known as
Tom Field) added a wagon shop and residence
to the little east-side town. Both buildings were
on the north side of the road (Springdale Street),
and the home Mr. Fjeld erected is the only
building left in the old town today. It is at 522
Springdale Street, and now owned by Walter
Messerschmidt.

1874—Andrew Thompson

In 1874 Andrew E. Thompson, a young Nor-
wegian from the Black Earth area, bought some
lots from N. H. Dryden on which he built a
wagon shop and a residence. A few years later
he enlarged the shop and carried a full line of
furniture, wallpaper, paint and coffins. He was
the first undertaker in Mt. Horeb. His home
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and store were a few rods north of the intersection on the east side of the road to Black Earth.

1875—Dr. P. C. Flaaten

During 1875 the small settlement welcomed its first doctor, Dr. P. C. Flaaten, who was born on a farm in Vermont Township. He was still a young man when he died, so apparently did not practice there long.

1876—Ole C. Nubson

In 1876 Ole C. Nubson bought Andrew Levedson's store and succeeded the temporary postmaster, Ole M. Helland, on September 22 of that year.

1876—Charley Lange

Charley Lange came to Mt. Horeb from Mazomanie about this time and went into the harness business on the south side of the road (Springdale Street).

1877—Curry and Ruste

A Mr. Curry and Allan Ruste formed a partnership and established the first hardware store. This store was located on the south side of the road (Springdale Street).

1878—Lars Dusterud

Lars Dusterud, who came from Norway in 1844, opened a store in the old town, his daughters renting part of it for their dressmaking and millinery store. This place was also located on the south side of Springdale Street.

1878—Christopher Brager

In 1878 Christopher Brager built the first hotel and tavern in the town. It was located at the corner of today's South Eighth Street and U. S. Highway 151. It was on the opposite corner (east) from the old Barrows' store. For many years part of the hotel building was the residence of Mrs. Sarah McKinley, but was finally razed in 1955 during widening of the highway. Mr. Brager was a painter and noted for his skill as a church interior decorator.

1880—Moulton and Elliot

A Mr. Moulton and Howard G. Elliott purchased the Ole Nubson store in the fall of 1880.

Dr. J. E. Downs

Very little is known about Dr. Downs. He came here from Mazomanie after the death of Dr. P. C. Plaat en and remained until about 1883.

Mount Horeb Creamery Association

This, the only creamery in the old town, was managed by a joint stock company and organized in February 4, 1879. Dane County History of 1880 stated “they have a convenient frame building, supplied with engine and improved machinery. A. O. (Anton) Bakken is the superintendent.”

James Batty Livery Stable

James Batty, who came to the old town from Mazomanie, opened a livery stable at some time during this period.

Andrew Thompson home, furniture store and shop north of the Union Cemetery on Black Earth Road. It was erected in 1876. Mr. Thompson was the first undertaker in Mount Horeb.
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Organizations in the old town included Sons of Temperance Lodge No. 40, Mt. Horeb Grange No. 599, the Blue Mounds Fire Insurance Company, the singing school, and the circulating library, with books being kept in Paul Sletto's store and Mr. Sletto acting as librarian.

The coming of the railroad in 1881 spelled the end of the old town. Most of the business places were moved to sites nearer the railroad depot in what is now the business section of Mt. Horeb. After some years all that remained of the little settlement at Horeb's Corners were: The Methodist church, creamery building, school house, part of the Brager hotel, and the homes of Richard Lowe, Torgrim Fjeld, Samuel Thompson and Andrew Thompson. And these, with the exception of the Fjeld house, have disappeared in recent years.
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