Museum Notes

for the week of October 18 – 24, 2026

by Kristen Parrott, curator

The annual road tour of Vernon County country schoolhouses will be held this Saturday, October 24. This self-guided tour will visit some of the remaining former country schoolhouses of the area. Some school buildings are now gone, but the tour will indicate the sites where they once stood.

This year's tour will cover the northwestern part of Vernon County. The route begins in Westby and travels in a loop through the hills and valleys of the Towns of Christiana, Coon, Hamburg, Bergen, Harmony, and Jefferson.

To start the tour, pick up a tour guidebook and map that day, October 24, between 9AM and 1PM at the historic Seas Branch School. The school is located next to Westby Elementary School at 122 Nelson St. in Westby. There is a suggested donation of $10 for the guidebook.

With guidebook and map in hand, you can then drive the tour of about 30 country schoolhouses and sites, enjoying the fall scenery and learning about rural architecture. Each stop will be marked with a little red schoolhouse sign. These signs will stay up until Sunday evening, so after purchasing the guide and map on Saturday morning, you have the rest of the weekend to drive the actual tour.

Recently we were given the diaries of Mattie Jackson Seiler (1888-1953), and volunteers have begun transcribing the entries for 1922, the year that she married. Her obituary indicates that she taught music at the Vernon County Normal School in Viroqua, but in 1922 she was clearly travelling around to the county's rural schools.

It appears that Mattie was supervising the teachers. The entry for February 1 reads, "Did not go supervising as weather was inclement." And on Tuesday, March 14, she travelled to La Crosse to attend a Supervising Teachers' Conference for several days. A few entries indicate that she was also giving standardized tests to the schoolchildren, including arithmetic tests, Rural Diploma tests, and State Graded tests.

Every week lists more schools. On January 10, Mattie went to Round Prairie. On January 11, she went to Lower Weister. On January 17, she went to Liberty Pole and Hinkst. On January 18, she went to Plainview and White Pigeon. And so on.

The diary usually doesn't list these places as "schools", but they are all familiar school names. Sometimes she travels with Palma Grahn, Vernon County's first public health nurse, whose job primarily involved working with rural school children, those who had less access to health care than the city kids. We know that Palma had an office inside the Normal School building, which is now home to our Vernon County Museum and History Center, and it appears that Mattie had an office space here too.

Mattie and her companions travelled to the schools in all weathers. She travelled by train when possible, as on April 5: "Left for Genoa this morn on the first S.E. [Southeastern train]. Got there for dinner. Visited Genoa & Riverside Schools." And the next day, "Via Burlington [train] to Victory."

But usually she went by car or buggy or sleigh, often with a driver. On March 6 she writes, "Started out for the country in a Ford, but came back for team." (She was travelling to Dach Ridge School that day.)

This weekend, you too can have the experience of driving out to see Vernon County's country schools!