



Lithomani & Dressed Litho

VIEW OF THE GREAT TREATY BUILDING AT PRAIRIE

SEPTEMBER 1825

at which upward's of 5000 Indian Warriors of the CHIPPEWAYS, SIOUX, SACS & FOXES, WINNEBAGOES, POTTOWATTOMI

Gov. LEWIS CASS of Michigan and W^m CLARK of Missouri, Commissioners on the part of the U N I

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OF FENCES AND GOOD NEIGHBORS

WHAT OUR FENCES SAY ABOUT OURSELVES

by Masarah Van Eyck

“Something there is that doesn’t love a wall.”
Robert Frost, “The Mending Wall”

Most of us are familiar with Robert Frost’s oft-quoted phrase “good fences make good neighbors.” In many ways, we believe that fences, borders, and even “emotional” boundaries help us to keep order, provide security, and even build unity. Perhaps more than ever, we consider fences an asset to national neighborliness; they help us restrict illegal immigration and drug trafficking, regulate trade and agricultural policies, and avert terrorist threats.

Yet to conjure Frost’s line from his poem “The Mending Wall” as a reflection of these values is to misquote and misrepresent his larger message. In the poem it is, in fact, a neighbor who declares that good neighbors are made by good fences. Frost himself voices ambivalence on the subject: “Before I built a wall,” he muses, “I’d ask to know/ What I was walling in or walling out,/ And to whom I was like to give offence.”

Treaties in 1825 and 1827 established boundaries between tribes of the Great Lakes region and allocated to the tribes land they already occupied. The treaties provided the legal foundation for the U.S. government to negotiate land cessions. In 1829, the Ho-Chunk sold a large portion of their land to the United States. The Ho-Chunk sold the last of their Wisconsin lands in 1837.

We encounter fences every day—some decorative and symbolic, others starkly impenetrable. But rarely do we take the time to think about what they mean. A Smithsonian exhibition, *Between Fences*, scheduled to tour six rural towns in Wisconsin from September 2007 through July 2008, will prompt visitors to consider the ways in which fences reflect our philosophies, our lifestyles, and our economies.

How have we defined ourselves, and our environment, by what we wall in? How do we define others by what we wall out? The exhibition's assemblage of tools, images, historical literature and—of course—fences, reveals just how central the fence is to the American landscape.

From the beginning of European exploration and settlement, fences have been instrumental in shaping Wisconsin's identity. Beyond separating livestock from crops, seizing land from its native inhabitants hinged on the European concept of private property. Demarcating space and “mingling” labor with the land, as John Locke put it, defined a settler's private property and, by default, his independence.

The materials used, however, have varied depending on the resources and labor available. Unlike in the eastern United States, where deforestation restricted the use of wood by the nineteenth century—and further west where it was naturally scarce—wood has remained a common material for the post and split-rail fences that encompassed Wisconsin farms.

That didn't stop late-nineteenth-century Danish immigrant Hans Henningsen of Leon to fashion over 150 fence posts out of granite, however. Cutting all of the stone using a star drill and wedges, Henningsen made the posts—each weighing on average 450 pounds—as long below ground as above. They still demarcate the original line fences, the cow lane, and the interior fences of his farm.

By the time Henningsen died in 1899, however, mass production machinery had begun to enable the widespread use of barbed wire, woven wire, and chain link fences, reflecting an increasingly industrial farm life. Steel posts and wire fencing have also allowed farmers to quickly and cheaply fence (and therefore claim) millions of acres of land.

Today, evolving technology and needs continue to shape the fences we build. Beyond the invisible fences that surround our yards and gardens, for example, and the electric fences that contain cattle, some residents of northern Wisconsin are finding themselves constructing new kinds of “predator fences” to protect their animals from the burgeoning timber wolf population.

Thanks to a successful forty-year wolf recovery program, timber wolves have crossed the Minnesota border and made their home back in Wisconsin as protected wildlife. Their numbers have increased from fifty in the 1950s to 500 today, and just last March the U.S. Fisheries and Wildlife Service delisted wolves from the federal list of threatened and endangered species. That means it is once again legal to kill wolves that threaten livestock or pets.

Norman Whitford

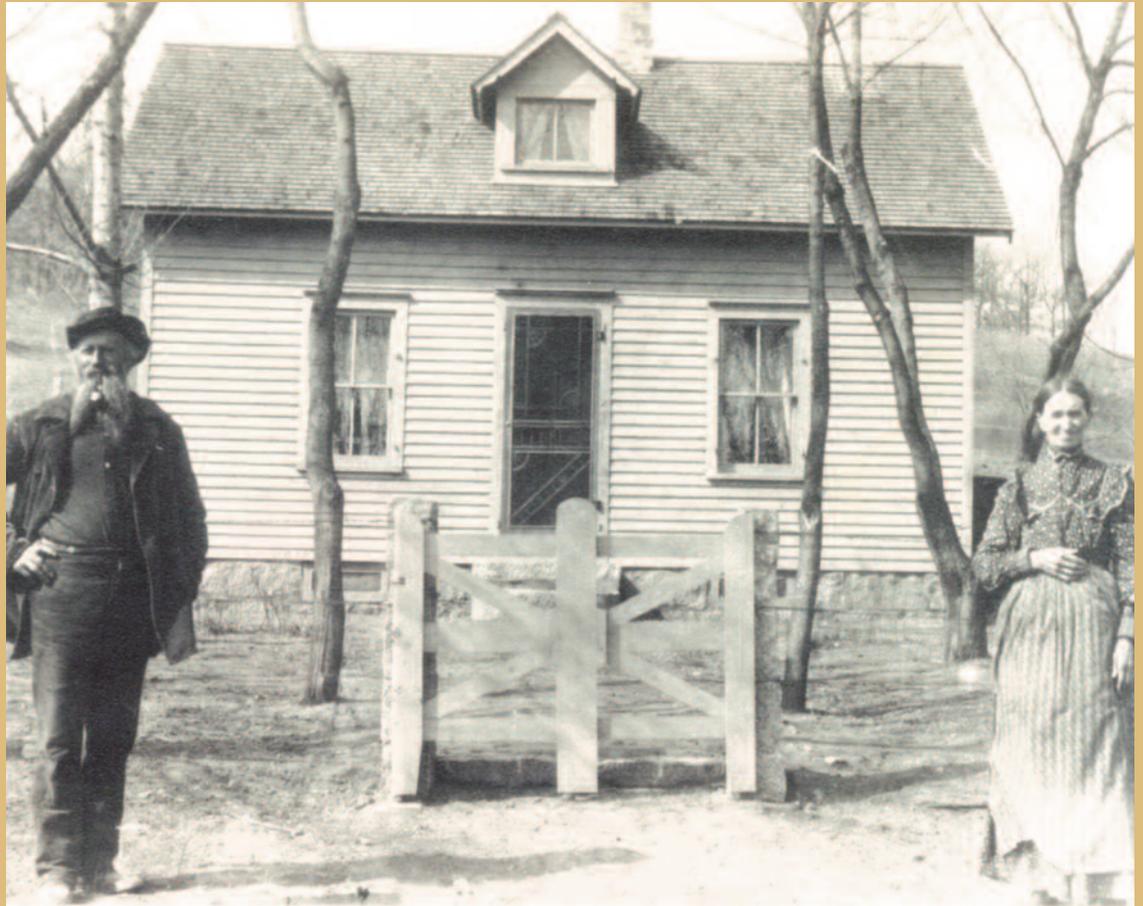


Danish immigrant Hans Henningsen carved over 150 fence posts out of granite using a star drill and wedges in the late nineteenth century. He stands near a piece of the fence with his wife, Caroline.

And for some residents of northern Wisconsin, that's a good thing. Wild animals, of course, heed neither state nor private boundaries, and this celebrated icon of the northwoods preyed on animals at twenty-five Wisconsin farms in 2005. Now some residents are asking who is responsible for building the fences to keep these publicly cultivated animals off of their private land.

More generally, we depend on the Department of Natural Resources to regulate the use of public resources through, say, fishing and hunting licenses. In once sense, these permits serve as boundaries themselves, monitoring an individual's access to our public, and often wild, domain.

Today, more and more Wisconsinites live in places that fall somewhere between wildlands and urban metropolises, as they strive to carve out a home that is private—in both senses of the word. Is it any coincidence that Thomas Jefferson altered the traditional English phrase “life, liberty, and property” in the Declaration of Independence to read “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness”? If, for colonists, the boundary between what they owned—separate and safe from individual or public hands—secured their very happiness, today the white picket



WHi Image ID 49110



Predator fences protect domestic animals from the growing timber wolf population. The wolves have increased in numbers to the point of being delisted from the U.S. Fisheries and Wildlife Service's federal list of threatened and endangered species.

fence continues for many to embody the American Dream.

Yet, as new and extended highways serve as conduits for greater connection to people, resources, and economic opportunities, they also erect physical barriers not unlike the proverbial railroad tracks of our past. Now former neighbors may literally be divided on either side of a concrete thoroughfare.

The village of Hales Corners, some fifteen miles from Milwaukee, for example, has recently been divided into four sections by Interstate-894 and highways 100 and 24. The strong local identity that persists despite these physical barriers, however, is testament to the fact that community can be defined and redefined beyond the dictates of walls.

Meanwhile, other places in Wisconsin, such as Sauk City and Prairie du Sac, are at once seamlessly connected, and yet preserve their distinct identities. These two towns—known collectively as “Sauk Prairie” for their geographical setting—amicably share municipal resources like a police department and even a school district. And while Oak Street divides the villages from one another, Water Street, is the “main street” for both downtowns!

Still as Wisconsin’s population grows, recent changes to the landscape have philosophically divided some neighbors who have differing visions for the future. Take, for example, the growth of private development along shorelines.

While the Public Trust doctrine incorporated into the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 establishes the navigable waters in our state as “common highways and forever free,”¹ new lake-front properties can limit public access to lakes, obstruct views, and/or change the quality of the waters themselves.

The Chain O’ Lakes in central Wisconsin, for example, has seen the number of buildings along its shorelines more than double since 1965. In other parts of the state, lakeside development is also causing soil erosion and phosphorous runoff pollution that result in algae blooms and fish kills. Now some residents believe that the government should protect these waters (and the fish that live there) with limitations on new developments. Others feel that the individuals who own the land have the right to do what they choose with their property.

We continue to relate to our neighbors with our fences—whether personal, national, geo-political, or conceptual. Beyond privacy and security, today’s fences (and fence disputes) reflect new issues about the protection of land, water, and wildlife, the regulation of public health and environmental quality, and the preservation of natural resources for years to come. However, while erecting new barriers may help us to secure a more certain future, their construction also requires—as always—that we continue to ask what we are walling out, and to whom we are like to give offence. ❧

Notes

1. When Wisconsin became a state in 1848, this provision was included in article IX, section 1, of the Wisconsin Constitution.

Hales Corners Historical Society



Bird’s eye view of Hales Corners before Interstate 894 and Wisconsin Highways 24 and 100 divided the village into four sections.

Hales Corners Historical Society



Hales Corners Historical Society



Despite the recent physical barriers imposed by highway construction, Hales Corners retains its local identity.

Hales Corners street crowded with horses and buggies. The hotel in this photo is the Neusel, long lost to highway construction.

WHI image ID 22695



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF
SAUK CITY, WIS.
1883.

Bird's-eye view of Sauk City in 1883. Sauk City and Prairie du Sac are collectively known as "Sauk Prairie." The two communities share municipal resources and a school district.

WHI image ID 12077



BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF
PRAIRIE DU SAC
SAUK COUNTY, WISCONSIN 1870.

Bird's-eye view of Prairie du Sac, ca. 1870. The towns of Prairie du Sac and Sauk Prairie are geographically connected, yet preserve their individual identities.

The Smithsonian is coming to a town near you!

Beginning in the fall of 2007, *Between Fences*, a traveling Museum on Main Street exhibition from the Smithsonian Institution, will spend six weeks each in Waupaca, Hales Corners, LaFarge, Sauk Prairie, Clear Lake, and Cable. The exhibition will be hosted by small museums, community centers, libraries, and historic sites, which were selected through a competitive application process. Each community will celebrate the Smithsonian coming to town with related events and programs.

For more information, contact the Wisconsin Humanities Council: 608-262-0706, www.wisconsinhumanities.org.



New bridge dedication in Sauk City, ca. 1920.

Photo by John Nondorf



The building of the Monona Terrace Community and Convention Center was a controversial use of Madison shoreline. Private development along shorelines often divides residents with differing visions for the future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Masarah Van Eyck holds a PhD in French history from McGill University. She served as the public scholar to Wisconsin's *Between Fences* tour during its inception. Research for this essay (and the accompanying exhibition kiosk) was conducted with Jessica Becker, program officer at the Wisconsin Humanities Council.