

Yep Ging

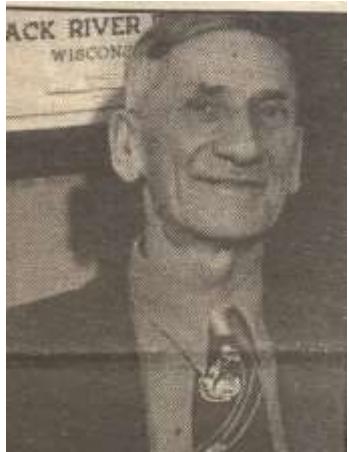
By Paul Rykken

Introduction

Unlike the grander, sweeping narratives of state or national history, community history often lies dormant in newspaper archives and courthouse basement shelves. Rather than finding a home in scholarly articles or textbooks, these stories live in handwritten letters, diaries in attic trunks, and, in some cases, words spoken from one generation to the next. Such stories, however, are not "less than" though less accessible; rather, if history frames collective memory, community history is the frame's fine wood grain, subtle and nuanced. Such is the story of Yep Ging, a Chinese citizen who landed in Black River Falls via San Francisco circa 1894. His life and its intersection with those of European and Indigenous backgrounds in frontier Wisconsin provide an important window into an earlier time.

My father, Reverend Thorwald Ansgar Rykken (known by most as Unk), first told me the story of Yep Ging

in the 1960s. Unk served as a repository of local history, especially stories that highlighted the best of humanity in a small community, made us laugh, or provided a unique twist of some kind. His love of people coupled with an insatiable curiosity about their



Chris Olson operated a restaurant in Black River Falls from 1913 until his semi-retirement in 1950.

backstories positioned him to see things that others missed – a trait I came to



Yep Ging arrived in Black River Falls in the 1890s and began working in the laundry operated by his relative, Yep Ah Sing. (Jackson County Historical Society Collection).

appreciate more as I got older. Unk learned the tale of the "Chinese laundryman" from Chris Olson, an elder parishioner, and life-long Black Riverian whose story intersected with Yep Ging's in more ways than one. Born in 1889, Chris came of age before automobiles, electricity, or radio.



T.A. Rykken, known to friends and family as "Unk," came to Black River Falls in 1962.

Unk and Chris spent a good deal of time swapping stories at Chris' home just around the corner from the parsonage, or during local fishing jaunts. I spent time at the Olson house as well and on several occasions, Chris hosted me for an evening supper filled with stories and TV watching. Anna, Chris' wife of 45 years, died shortly after our family moved to Black River Falls in 1962. Unk conducted her funeral, something I suspect bonded the men. Years later, it further dawned on me that Chris was roughly the age of Unk's father who died an

untimely death in 1945 when Unk was 19 and off fighting in World War II. Further, Unk was the same age as Chris' son

Arnold who tragically died in the Korean Conflict in October of 1951. It seems likely that the 74-year-old widower and 38-year-old pastor shared stories of grief during their many exchanges.

The Sojourn of Yep Ging

Piecing together Yep Ging's journey is no easy task and requires what historian Greg Dening refers to as the application of "creative imagination" to the sketchy details of his life.¹ A smattering of facts offers more questions than answers, and we must be open to the silences in his story. Born in Guangzhou, China (formerly Canton) in 1868, he made the nearly 7,000-mile voyage to San Francisco at age 12.² We learn nothing about who accompanied him or why he would embark on such a momentous adventure and can only marvel that he survived. In doing so, of course, he joined tens of thousands of Chinese citizens who ventured to our Pacific shores during the latter 19th century. Prompted by the 1848 discovery of gold in California, the first waves arrived in the 1850s. By decade's end, Chinese workers made up nearly a quarter of the state's manual laborers.³ From 1863-69, railroad companies hired roughly 15,000 Chinese workers for the completion of the transcontinental line. These primarily young, single men often took on the most dangerous tasks and received significantly less pay than their white counterparts.⁴ Though Yep arrived after 1869 and the completion of the line, he did work for the railroad during his first years in San Francisco. He, no doubt, became acutely aware of the rising tide of anti-Asian

sentiment during these years, culminating in the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

Consistent with a recurring pattern in American history, the Act effectively barred any further Chinese

immigration to the US until 1943.⁵ Editorial

cartoons and news

articles of the period hearken to the racist attitudes among many white Americans, prompted in part by fear of cheap foreign laborers competing for jobs.⁶ In the face of such anti-Chinese sentiment, tens of thousands of immigrants returned to China after the passage of the Exclusion Act. Thousands remained though, including those that filtered east into urban centers, fanning out to smaller cities, like Black River Falls.



The Wasp, a San Francisco-based weekly magazine of the period, frequently published anti-Asian propaganda. This 1882 cartoon by George Frederick Keller is an example. (Oakland Museum of California).

A good deal of history surrounds the prevalence of Chinese immigrants in the laundry business in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and Yep Ging's sojourn to west-central Wisconsin must be viewed within the context of that broader history. Wah Lee opened the first such "hand laundry business" in San Francisco's Chinatown in 1851 in the wake of the Gold Rush. Though difficult and exhausting, laundry work was open to Chinese immigrants because it did not require special skills and was non-threatening to the white population. Viewed as a threat to "native" workers, Chinese immigrants were prevented access to higher-paying jobs and often forced to take on menial labor.⁷ In time, thousands of Chinese laundries sprang up throughout the nation, including Wisconsin. Milwaukee, for example, had 30 Chinese laundries by 1887 and that number doubled by 1930.⁸

Establishing a laundry business in downtown Black River Falls proved challenging. In 1883, Robert Innes made the first attempt, and it was a short-lived venture. Three years later, W.B. Kinley and his wife successfully launched the B.R.F. Laundry, noted for being conducted “to win the confidence of the public,” and for its “first-class work.”⁹ In 1889, Yep Lim arrived from Wausau opening a laundry on North Second Street in a building owned by local photographer Charles Van Schaick. After a short stay, he sold his business to Yep Ah Sing, who moved the laundry to the J.P. Crosby building on West Main Street.¹⁰ Yep Ah Sing is identified as a cousin of Yep Ging, a relationship

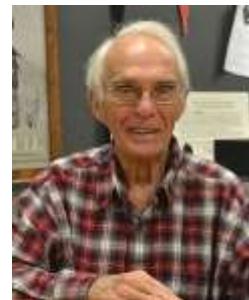
illustrating the familial networking prevalent within immigrant communities. It was through Yep Ah Sing, then, that the central character of this essay arrived in the small river city in the mid-1890s. In 1898, he purchased the already established laundry business from his cousin.¹¹



Yep Ah Sing, a relative of Yep Ging, established the Chinese Laundry in Black River Falls in the 1880s. Family connections of this kind help explain why Chinese immigrants sought opportunities in small Wisconsin communities. (JCHS Collection).

Yep Ging’s Chinese Laundry became a fixture in the bustling downtown business district and remained in operation for nearly 40 years. Clothing styles of the period, including detachable, starched collars for men, coupled with the grinding challenge of “doing laundry” every week, created a strong demand for Yep Ging’s service, particularly among the community’s professional class who noted the quality of his work. Long-time Black River Falls resident John Noble, born in 1923, offered this eye-witness memory from his boyhood concerning the Chinese Laundry: “We

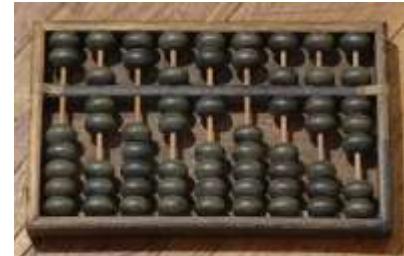
went down and climbed up on something and were looking in the window where Yep Ging was working on it. He did a beautiful job. He had these shirts that had big starch collars and all. The thing that kind of impressed me—throw a small dose of water and sprayed a little bit about as he's ironing. And he had the old gas stove sitting there with the irons. You know where you click one on and you let it heat and then you drop it, the little button, and you can click the other one. Ironing with that—and just was beautiful work.”¹²



Dr. John Noble (1923-2013)
recounted visiting Yep Ging as
a boy in the early 1930s.

Periodic references in local newspapers give us some sense of Yep Ging's personality and interactions with residents during his tenure. He lived in simple quarters adjacent to the laundry and visiting him meant experiencing a slice of Chinese culture, an exotic experience for residents of a frontier community in the US heartland. Long-handled Chinese cooking dishes hung in his living room. He offered Chinese bulbs and lychee nuts to patrons during their visits. Customers recalled seeing him use a Chinese Abacus for bookkeeping purposes. In 1904, he “added a large gramophone to his laundry equipment,” so to treat customers “to a tune with every package of laundry work.”¹³ His love of music was on display a year later when he


This 1904 Gramophone is the type that Yep Ging would have installed in 1904. Invented in 1887 by German immigrant Emile Berliner, these would have still seemed a novelty in 1904.



The Abacus is a calculating tool that dates to ancient times. Yep Ging taught employees to use the device.

introduced Clio Club members (including Mrs. C.J. Van Schaick, Mrs. J.D. Spaulding, Mrs. Lulu Comstock, and Dr. and Mrs. R.C. Gebhardt) to the “mysteries of a Chinese opera by means of phonographic reproductions.”¹⁴

Beyond music, we learn that Yep Ging was an avid baseball fan, and, when “Black River Falls had an almost professional ball team (early 20th century), he was always with it and sat and cheered whether anybody else did or not.”¹⁵ On the 10th anniversary of his laundry in 1908, Yep

Ging had been in Black River "longer than any other citizen of the Flowery Kingdom." He was "busy ever since the day of his arrival," did "good work with a smile" and had "a lot of good friends among his customers."¹⁶

At least one local resident, Harriet Noble, long-time editor of the Banner Journal, was able to converse with Yep Ging, albeit minimally, in his native

language.¹⁷ Noble and her husband James Bowen Noble lived in China for a time. Exchanges with Harriet and occasional visits by Chinese acquaintances were likely welcomed by Yep Ging, who in Noble's words, "was not a citizen here," had "no living relatives in China," and was a "man without



The Coles Carbolized Salve Baseball Team in 1904, sponsored by Coles Drug Store, may have been the team referenced in Yep Ging's obituary. (JCHS Collection)

a country."¹⁸ Despite his optimistic countenance, it is not hard to imagine that Yep Ging experienced loneliness and alienation from time to time in his adopted home. Described as quiet, unassuming, and mild-mannered in a 1927 entry, we learn that when asked about the turmoil roiling his home country, he simply responded, "No care; like it here."¹⁹ Having left China 47 years earlier, his early life undoubtedly had receded from memory.



Harriet Noble (1887-1969) was a well-known figure in Black River Falls. She retained a fascination with China throughout her lifetime.

The post-World War I era and Depression years proved challenging for Yep Ging and his laundry business.

In 1919, the Krohn Clinic bought the building that housed the laundry with plans for building a new clinic and hospital on this block. Yep Ging moved the laundry one door east into the building formerly occupied by the Wheeler Restaurant. Ultimately, the new location was also short-lived, and, during the years 1931-1936, these buildings were

purchased and razed to accommodate the Clinic and Hospital.²⁰ In addition to these developments, the demand for laundry work fell off by the middle to late 1930s, in part owing to changes in clothing styles.



Looking east in the downtown district in 1912. The Krohn Clinic is the first building shown on the left. Yep Ging's laundry is the building to the left and slightly forward from the Model T. He lived one door east of the building in a room above the Wheeler Restaurant. Eventually, this block became the site of the expanded Krohn Clinic and Hospital, and today, the Black River Country Bank and Waumandee State Bank. (JCHS Collection)

Yep Ging's Final Years

Described by his friend Chris Olson as a proud and independent individual, Yep Ging fell on hard times by 1937. With both his laundry and living quarters gone, he needed help. Having met over 35 years prior when Chris became part owner of Brownies Restaurant, the two were friends. Now the owner of Olson's Café, Chris saw to it that Yep had good meals daily. In 1940, Chris accompanied Yep for a tour of the County Home (formerly known as the "Poor Farm") with hopes of convincing him to become a resident there. Initially skeptical, Yep, described on the Home's register as "homeless," lived there in his final years. Becoming ill in December of 1942, Yep died peacefully on the morning of January 5, 1943, in his 75th year.

Yep Ging's modest Christian funeral took place on Friday, January 8, 1943, at the Mattson Funeral Home, followed by a graveside service at Riverside Cemetery where Chris purchased a burial plot for his friend. Sixteen years earlier, Yep had become a member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, perhaps at the urging of Chris, himself a lifelong member of the parish.²¹ ELC Reverend A.M. Romstad was called away on an emergency, and so H.A. Allison of the Methodist

congregation conducted the funeral in his stead. Several of Yep's friends attended, honoring the man they had come to love and respect.

Harriet Noble adds this romantic flourish in her account of the funeral: "As the door was opened for those in attendance at the service to go out a shaft of afternoon sun lay across the simple casket, the calm, placid face and the spray of flowers that had been placed on the casket by friends. The sun that the Chinese love, especially in winter."²²



Yep Ging became a member of Evangelical Lutheran Church in 1927, The church sat on Third Street, just around the corner from the Laundry.

Sequel: Captain Arnold Olson and the Irony of History

As first recounted to me by my father, the tale of Yep Ging includes a tragic and ironic twist, interwoven with a story of authentic heroism. Chris Olson's son Arnold (born in 1925 and better known as Arnie), graduated from Black River Falls High School in 1943, the same year that Yep Ging died. Described by those who knew him as a brilliant student, he enlisted under the Volunteer Naval Reserve (V-5) program at age 17, part of the military's aviation training regime. He received his wings at Pensacola Naval Air Station in 1946, and though leaving active duty, remained in the Marine Corps Reserves. He returned to Wisconsin in 1947 attending UW-Madison and graduating in 1950 with a degree in biochemistry. His intentions were to go on to graduate school at the University of Minnesota and ultimately pursue cancer research. Those plans were abruptly altered when North Korea invaded South Korea in June of 1950.

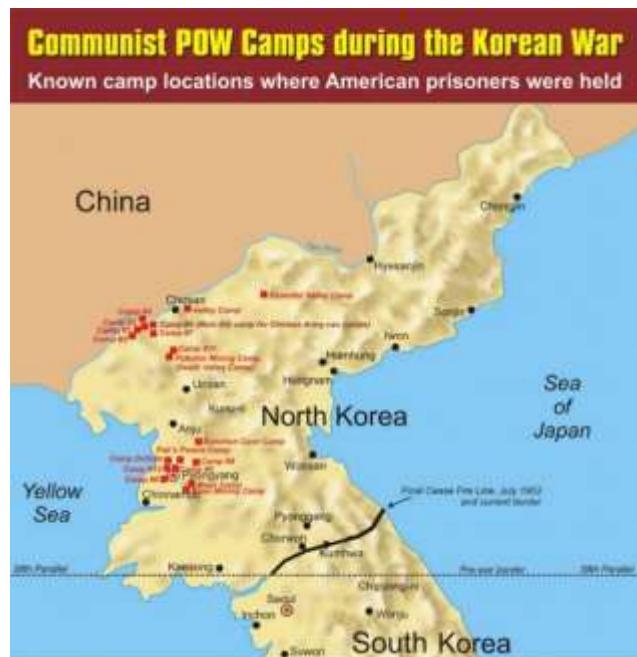


Captain Arnold Olson (1925-1951)

Recalled to extended service in August, now First Lieutenant Olson was assigned to El Toro Field in Santa Ana, California, where he became an instructor in radiological and chemical warfare. In January of 1951, Arnie and Mary Jo Kroh were married, but, only five months later, Arnie was ordered to join Marine Night Fighter Squadron 513, Marine Aircraft Group 12, First Marine Aircraft Wing in South Korea. In only his third combat mission, on July 13, Arnie was shot down roughly 50 miles north of the 38th Parallel, managed to bail out before crashing, and hid for nearly a day before being captured by North Korean soldiers. He was held prisoner near Pyonggang until mid-September before being subjected to a 500-mile march to the Chansong Prison Camp near the Yalu River and border with China. Of the 120 prisoners who began the nearly month-long march, only 80 survived the traumatic ordeal. One week after arriving at the Camp, 26-year-old Arnold Olson died of malnutrition and was buried on a lonely hillside near the prison.



Marine combat pilots used the Vought F4U Corsair during both World War II and the Korean Conflict. It is likely that Lieutenant Olson was flying this type of plane at the time he was shot down in 1951.



One third of the men died during the forced 500-mile march from Pyonggang northwest to the Chinese border area. Arnold Olson survived the march but died one week later in October of 1951.

On Saturday, July 14, 1951, Chris and Anna Olson received a telegram in Black River Falls alerting them their son was missing in action. To say the least, their world changed in an instant, and, for more than 12 excruciating months, they held out hope they may see their son again. In late August of 1952, Arnie's death was verified, yet few details were offered. The following

summer, a fellow prisoner, Private Alfred Graham, Jr., the first Marine veteran to be returned as part of a prisoner exchange, contacted Arnie's wife Mary Jo, providing the sad details of her husband's demise. In September of 1953, Chris and Anna traveled with Mary Jo first to New York, and then to Arlington, Virginia, to meet with Graham, who indicated to them that he would never have survived the march and imprisonment without their son's support and encouragement. Further, they learned that the men did receive medical care in the Chinese prison, but that Arnold at that point, was unable to retain food of any kind.²³

Just before his tragic death, Lieutenant Olson had been promoted to Captain, a rank he received posthumously, along with several awards related to his service. Anna and Chris received Gold Star lapel pins as well as a plaque from President Eisenhower in recognition of Arnie's achievements. In late winter 1955, Captain Olson's remains were located and ultimately returned to Black River Falls for a proper memorial. On a beautiful spring day in late April, an impressive service was held at Evangelical Lutheran Church. One week earlier, the church dedicated new stained-glass windows on the east end of the sanctuary, gifts of the Olson family. For several days before the memorial, local veterans served as an honor guard for Arnie as he lay in state at the Langlois-Galston Funeral Home, including Ronald Olson, Robert Amo, Mahlon Holmgreen, James Dell, Lawrence Jones, Clarence Rerels, Myron Funmaker, Fred Big Soldier, Thomas Sampson, Don Larson, Andrew Thundercloud, and Thomas Hopinkah. Pastor Raymond Huss officiated at Arnie's funeral, with Captain John Noble, Robert Otis, Frank



The stained-glass windows on either side of the altar are reminders of Arnold Olson and his family. Chris and Anna Olson gave them in memory of Arnold and his grandparents in 1955.

Snowdon, Don Larson, George Hartman, and Hugh Trask serving as pallbearers.

Reverend Mitchell Whiterabbit served as chaplain for the graveside service, including full military honors. Oswald Johnson folded the flag and presented it to Mary Jo Olson, the fallen soldier's widow. Elmo Johnson completed the ceremony with the playing of taps. Notably, this impressive service was the second in just over a month for the small Wisconsin community. Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr., Medal of Honor recipient, was killed in November of 1951, roughly two weeks after Arnie. He was returned in the same manner and buried at Decorah Cemetery in March of 1955.²⁴



Captain Arnold Olson and Corporal Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. were classmates at Black River Falls High School (Class of 1943).

Conclusion

有缘千里来相会

“Fate brings people together a thousand miles apart.”

German author and journalist Kurt W. Marek (1915-1972) offers the following observation concerning history in his book, Gods, Graves, and Scholars: “The forces of the past still live on and exert their influence on us, though we may not be consciously aware of this.”²⁵ Born 57 years apart, Yep Ging and Arnold Olson illustrate Marek’s assertion. Yep’s journey from China to a small midwestern community was the product of push and pull factors prompting migrations from his home country to the United States, particularly the grinding poverty and civil disorder experienced by so many, coupled with the dream of a better life across the ocean. More than 140 years later, we must admire his tenacity, courage, and determination to succeed in his adopted land. On the other hand, Arnie joined millions in his generation, swept up in the global battle against totalitarianism in a land distant from his home. Again, we are awed by his bravery and unselfish sacrifice. That Chris Olson, an unassuming and kind man of faith, bridged these two lives, offers an example of the ancient Chinese proverb, “Fate brings people together a thousand

miles apart." He took it upon himself to ensure that his good friend, Yep Ging, though destitute in those later years, would not go hungry. And we can only imagine the anguish Chris felt when his only son died of starvation in a Chinese prison camp, a tragic irony pointed out to me by my father all those years ago.

Finally, taking that imaginary stroll through the early 20th-century world of downtown Black River Falls reminded me, again, of the truth of L.P. Hartley's famous aphorism, "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."²⁶ So much of this story remains hidden from view, and I remain forever convinced that we possess but a small window into the diversity of the people and their essential goodness. The intersecting lives of Yep Ging, Chris Olson, and his son Arnie illustrate both triumph and tragedy and are a powerful reminder of our universal humanity.



A warm shaft of sunlight graced the stone marker honoring Yep Ging as it was placed at Riverside Cemetery in August of 2022. May he rest in peace.



Yep Ging (1868-1943)
(Jackson County History Room's collection)

Acknowledgments: Preserving Local History



Mary I. Murray Woods
Jackson County History Room Historian
Black River Falls Public Library

“Yep Ging deserves a grave marker!” Mary Woods’ emphatic statement to me several months ago, prompted this exploration of the intriguing story of the Chinese laundryman. Mary and I have collaborated on a multitude of projects for more than twenty years as part of the Falls History Project, and her passion for organizing and preserving local history is a continuing gift. Verifying Yep Ging’s gravesite at Riverside Cemetery, something of a mystery at that, and securing a headstone to honor him, was the goal from the start, something that Mary and her friend and fellow-historian Jo Ann Dougherty were determined to do. I am gratified to join them in that effort.

In addition to the efforts of Mary and Jo Ann, exploring the story of Yep Ging reminded me of how often I have benefited from the diligence of both Jean Anderson and Pearl (Toddy) Porath. Though both are gone now, their influence continues. I have lost track of the number of times I have encountered their names within the voluminous files in the History Room. Preserving the past is cumulative work, and our region’s story would be less complete without their tireless efforts. It was my good fortune to know them, and their passing reminds me of that African proverb: “When an elder dies, a library burns to the ground.”



Darren Durman

Thanks also to local businessman and history detective Darren Durman for his help with pictures and for his expertise on the evolution of the downtown area. Finally, I would be remiss if I did not thank my eldest daughter Kate who patiently edits many of my attempts at writing and has been doing so since we launched the FHP. An English Major from UW-Madison, Kate helps me “polish up” the end products. Research is enjoyable but organizing my thoughts and putting them on paper is hard work!

Paul ST Rykken
February 2022



Jo Ann Dougherty



Jean Anderson
(1930-2019)



Pearl (Toddy) Porath
(1919-2013)



Kathryn Rykken

Notes

¹ Greg Dening richly explores “creative imagination” in his essay, “Empowering Imaginations,” *Contemporary Pacific* 9, no.2 (Fall 1997: 419-420).

² Yep Ging’s age remains a subject of confusion. Wisconsin census records from 1905 identify him as 37 years old, meaning he was born in 1868, although his death certificate indicates that his date of birth is “unknown.” Further, the Federal Census record from 1920 records his age as 55 and birth year “about 1865.” For purposes of this essay, I am using the Wisconsin census record which means that Yep Ging was 75 years old when he died in 1943.

³ My general information regarding Chinese immigration and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act is drawn from the 16th Edition of *The American Pageant* by David Kennedy and Lizabeth Cohen, pages 500-501.

⁴ “Forgotten by Society” – How Chinese Migrants Built the Transcontinental Railroad.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 18 July 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jul/18/forgotten-by-society-how-chinese-migrants-built-the-transcontinental-railroad>.

⁵ “Chinese Exclusion Act (1882).” Our Documents - Chinese Exclusion Act (1882),

<https://www.ourdocuments.gov/doc.php?flash=false&doc=47>. Beyond barring immigrants from China, the Act placed requirements on Chinese who had already entered the United States. Among other things, they were barred from citizenship.

⁶ Walfred, Michele. “Chinese Exclusion.” *Illustrating Chinese Exclusion*, 11 Feb. 2016, <https://thomasnastcartoons.com/tag/chinese-exclusion/>.

⁷ “How the Chinese Laundry Became a Job of Last Resort of Early Chinese in America.” *AsAmNews*, 4 May 2020, <https://asamnews.com/2020/04/30/how-racism-and-discrimination-made-working-in-a-laundry-the-job-of-last-resort-for-chinese-in-america/>.

⁸ Mueller, Brian. “Chinese.” *Encyclopedia of Milwaukee*, 24 Mar. 2020, <https://emke.uwm.edu/entry/chinese/>.

⁹ “B.R.F. Laundry.” *Badger State Banner*, 20 Aug. 1891, p. 3.

¹⁰ Local newspaper accounts offer no further information regarding Yep Lim, and it is unclear if he was a relative of Yep Ah Sing. It is evident, however, that Chinese immigrants were communicating with each other in frontier Wisconsin and prepared to move to find work.

¹¹ Anderson, Jean G. “Looking Back: Jackson County.” *Banner Journal*, 10 June 1992, pp. 9B-9B.

¹² Noble, John. “Falls History Project: The China Connection: Black River to Shanghai.” Falls History Project, Black River Falls High School, 2013, <https://fallshistoryproject.files.wordpress.com/2018/05/2013-edit.pdf>.

¹³ *Jackson County Journal*, 21 Dec. 1904.

¹⁴ *Jackson County Journal*, 15 March, 1905. The Clio Club was one of many active organizations within the community during this period and focused on literary and historical themes.

¹⁵ Noble, Harriet. “Yep Ging Is Dead.” *The Banner Journal*, 6 Jan. 1943.

¹⁶ *Jackson County Journal*, 13 May, 1908.

¹⁷ Lin, Sandy. “The China Connection: Black River to Shanghai.” Falls History Project, 2013, <https://fallshistoryproject.com/project-index/>. James Bowen Noble and D.W.A. Holder married sisters, Harriet and Grace Thomas. The couples lived and worked in China during the World War I era. In the 2013 project, we interviewed several of their children to explore their unique story.

¹⁸ Anderson, Jean G. “Looking Back: Jackson County.” *The Banner Journal*, 10 June 1992, p. 9B.

¹⁹ *The Banner Journal*, 1 Jan. 1927.

²⁰ In 1932, the Krohn family opened a new brick building on this site as a clinic and hospital, with a significant addition in 1936, and further expansion in the 1950s.

²¹ Yep Ging’s membership at ELC is verified by records from 1927.

²² Noble, Harriet. “Yep Ging.” *The Banner Journal*, 13 Jan. 1943.

²³ “Mr. and Mrs. Chris Olson Hear Details of Son’s Fate.” *The Banner Journal*, 23 September 1953.

²⁴ The story of Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr. was our initial one for the Falls History Project and can be accessed here: <https://fallshistoryproject.files.wordpress.com/2021/10/red-cloud-and-the-power-of-memory-2021-revision.pdf>

²⁵ Fehrenbach, T. R. *Fire and Blood: A Bold and Definitive Modern Chronicle of Mexico*. Collier Books, 1973, p. 3.

²⁶ Hartley, L. P. *The Go-Between*. H. Hamilton, 1953. Hartley’s assertion about history is the first line of his novel and captures one of the central challenges of exploring the past, particularly when we filter through our present circumstances.

Author Bio



Paul ST Rykken, MA, is a lecturer with the First Nations Studies Department at UW-Green Bay, teaching through the Virtual Academy. A graduate of Concordia College (Moorhead, MN), he retired in 2020 after 41 years of teaching high school in Minnesota, North Dakota, and Wisconsin. He initiated the Falls History Project with colleague John Pellowski and served as director for twenty years. He also contributes to Wisconsin First Nations, a website devoted to American Indian Studies. He resides in Black River Falls, Wisconsin.

A Note Concerning the Falls History Project

History colleague John Pellowski and I shared a passion for connecting students to local history, and often discussed how we could make that happen. In July of 2001, I participated in a Gilder-Lehrman sponsored seminar at Amherst College in Massachusetts led by David Blight and Jim and Lois Horton. The theme of the conference was the Underground Railroad. The idea for the Falls History Project was derived from that experience. Blight's admonition that, "History must be imagined before it can be understood," challenged me to consider how we could help young people (and a broader audience) to reimagine our local history and place it into the broader context of the American story. Roughly a year later, we launched our first project, an exploration of World War II through the eyes of local veterans. In addition, I profiled the life of Mitchell Red Cloud, Jr., BRFHS graduate and Medal of Honor recipient from the Korean Conflict. Our intention, from the start, has been to develop an archive for future history students and community members to utilize. Through 2022, we have completed 20 projects, had 23 interns, conducted more than 80 interviews, and produced more than 1,000 pages of archival material.

Our projects are housed on our website: fallshistoryproject.com.