Volume XXVII, Issue 3 Fall 2026

# SHAKOPEE HERITAGE SOCIETY

## NEWSLETTER




## The Crucifix in the Mud August 20, 1931

Riley Bressette, a 45-year-old French Chippewa, was dubbed “the railroad spike sculptor” by Twin Cities newspapers. He attracted much attention with his crucifix grotto at the high bridge in St. Paul. Using a spike, he reproduced the crucifixion, resurrection, and Christ in Gethsemane in sandstone. He raised $106, and used the money to feed a large number of unemployed people.

One account notes that Bressette was a 1930s Chippewa (Ojibwe) sculptor and folk artist active in the Twin Cities. Known for using unique materials like mud, limestone, and railroad spikes, he famously carved figures in Twin Cities limestone caves and created public sculptures including a tribute to fallen Northwest Airways pilot Charles Speed Holman.






Charles Willis Speed Holman (1898-1957) was a native Minnesotan (who also lived in Shakopee) with a series of aerial feats, breaking numerous speed and stunt flying records. In 1917, 19-year-old Charley Holman was a gawky high school dropout with a perennial grin. He continued his racing career, and was always ready to up the ante when it came to aerobatic hijinks. In February 1928, he made a world record 1,093 consecutive inside loops.

On May 17, 1931, 20,000 spectators were on hand in Omaha, Nebraska, to watch Holman fly his shiny black Laird. Wallace C. Peterson, then 10 years old, vividly remembered that day: “Like every other spectator on that warm May afternoon, my eyes were locked onto Holman’s biplane as he dove repeatedly to within a hundred feet of the ground, roared past the grandstands at around 250 m.p.h., and then zoomed and rolled high into the sky… Holman started his last dive north of the field, flying downwind to give the spectators the illusion of even greater speed, rolling the Laird upside down when perhaps 300 feet in the air…As the plane rolled over, everyone came to their feet, blocking my view so I did not see the final crash. But I heard it — it was like a great pop…Spectators reported that just before the crash, Holman’s body seemed to be hanging halfway out of the cockpit, which led to the belief that Holman’s safety belt broke, causing the crash. Some pilots told reporters they thought at the last second Holman managed to control the plane enough to avoid crashing into the stands.”

The *New York World-Telegram* reported: “Holman died as [Knute] Rockne died, at the peak of his career. He died as he lived, with a roar and a flash at three hundred miles per hour.” His funeral was the largest in Minnesota’s history, drawing 100,000 mourners along the route to his grave. Today he is enshrined in Minnesota’s Aviation Hall of Fame, and St. Paul’s municipal airport, Holman Field, is named in his honor.

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## Shakopee Heritage Society Presentations
## Shakopee Community Center

Shakopee Heritage Society gives one-hour presentations at the Shakopee Community Center Ṡakpe Ti at 1255 Fuller Street South, Shakopee on the second Tuesday of each month from 1-2 p.m. The presentations are free.

Aug. 18, 2026 1 to 2 pm: ***"We Were Here, Too!" African Americans in Early Shakopee***
Sep. 8, 2026 1 to 2 pm: ***The Great Fire of 1879***
Oct. 13, 2026 1 to 2 pm: ***Hola! Latinos/Latinas and Hispanics soin Early Shakopee***
Nov. 10, 2026 1 to 2 pm: ***Old Town, New Town: Shakopee in the Last 50 Years***



## Cemetery Tours

Cemetery tours happen four times a year at four cemeteries in the area on a Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon. The tours this summer were at Marystown Cemetery, Calvary Cemetery, Valley Cemetery, and Shakopee Catholic Cemetery. Tours will happen again next summer.

## Cemetery Cleaning at Valley Cemetery

The Daughters of the American Revolution Keewaydin Chapter and the Shakopee Heritage Society have worked on cleaning the cemetery using D2, the cleaner. They are meeting on the second and fourth Thursday, starting at 9 a.m. We have been doing this for the last five years! Questions? David Schleper at 952 693 3865.

## Presentations at Benedictine Living Community

- **The Bricks: The Owners, the People and the Workers in Early Shakopee** August 11, 2026 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. at Windermere Way
- **So Groovy! Shakopee in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s** September 15, 2026 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. at Windermere Way
- **The Battle of Shakopee in 1858** October 20, 2026, 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. at Windermere Way
- **Old Town, New Town: Shakopee in the Last 50 Years** November 17, 2026 2 p.m. to 3 p.m. at Windermere Way

## Presentations at Scott County Historical Society

Presentations are at the Scott County Historical Society at 235 Fuller St. S., Shakopee and at 952-445-0378. Please call to let them know if you are coming. It's free! From 5:30 p.m. to 6:30 p.m.

- Wednesday, August 12, 2026 at 5:30 to 6:30 pm **A+ for Teachers: Educators in Early Shakopee**
- Wednesday, October 14, 2026 at 5:30 to 6:30 pm **Weird and Wonderful in Early Shakopee**
- Wednesday, December 9, 2026 at 5:30 to 6:30 pm **Instigate, Inflame, and Ignite: Fires in Early Shakopee**



**Joan Ellen Prodahl**

Eleanor Thielen, the wife of the chief of police, was outside, hanging clothes on the line near the Minnesota River, about four blocks from the Minnesota Correctional Facility-Shakopee (called the Reformatory). According to an article in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, Saturday, April 12, 1954, a fugitive, Joan Ellen Prodahl, age twenty, was escaping the women's reformatory.

Prodahl was serving five to forty years for two grocery store holdups. She had been outside hanging clothes at the reformatory at about 9 a.m. before walking away and heading to the river bottom about three blocks away.

Chief Pat Thielen and reformatory officials began searching for her.

Eleanor saw the officials searching the river bottoms not too far from the Thielen house. "I left half a basket of clothes and went into the house to get my binoculars," Eleanor said. "I walked toward the river bank and heard a sharp crack from the brush below."

"I peaked over the edge of the bank and there she was—walking in the brush along the edge of the river."

Eleanor ran to a neighbor's house and called the reformatory, then went home and got a gun. "When she got back to the river bank, she follows the woman about a block," according to the article in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*.

According to Eleanor, "I called out to her—I don't remember what I said—and she stopped and turned around. I was holding the pistol at my side. If she had said 'Boo' I think I would have run all the way home."

As the two of them headed back to the reformatory, a group of officials met them and took her away.



***Riley Bressette (continued from page 1***

Historical records and archival documents from the era detail his creative methods and works. Having no traditional studio space, Bressette worked with “gumbo” mud, railroad spikes, and jackknifes. His clay-like sculptures hardened into stone, allowing him to leave pieces erect in public parks and surrounding limestone caves.

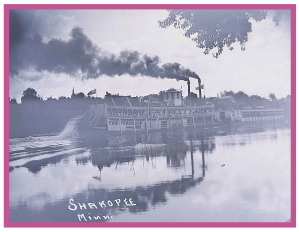
His unique creative trajectory was documented in regional newspapers during the early 1930s, including stories about his itinerant work between Minnesota and Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

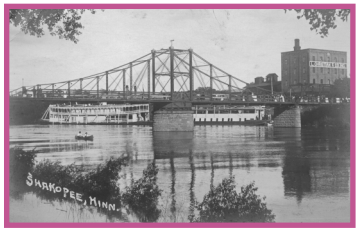
In the August 20, 1931 *Shakopee Argus-Tribune* article, “Chippewa Indian Does Life-size Crucifix in Mud on River Bank,” Riley worked with his hands and a rusty pocket knife to execution of a life-sized crucifix in the mud of the river bank beneath the north end of Holmes Street bridge. The Holmes Street Bridge, built in 1927 and replaced the Lewis Street Swing Bridge, which was built in 1880. When the Holmes Street Bridge was built, the Lewis Street Swing Bridge was open for foot traffic until 1942, when the government requisitioned the scrap metal, and the 100 tons of metal was used for bombs, jeeps, and ships. The Holmes Street Bridge was replaced by the Lewis Street Bridge, and the Holmes Street Bridge has been open for walking and biking since 1993.

The artist worked from memory, using the mud on the Minnesota River bank not too far from Riverside Park, where the Shakopee Indians played ball until they moved to the Joe Schleper Stadium at Tahpah Park. Riley Bressette’s father was a French Canadian, and his mother was a Chippewa. According to Riley, “I’m a sketch artist, sign painter, sculptor, piano mover, and furniture wrestler.” Riley’s friend, Charlie Cloud, helped assist Bressette with the heavy work. Both men hailed from the Wisconsin Chippewa reservation.

According to the *Shakopee Argus-Tribune* on August 20, 1931, Bressette explained to the thousands who viewed his work here that he has “better clothes but does not wear ‘em on the road.” He was a bit unkempt and somewhat coarse in mannerisms. Spectators marveled at the accuracy and expressiveness of the image. They could scarily believe the man, to whom they spoke, to be the sculptor. His clothes were spattered with mud, his lips stained with tobacco juice, and a soiled pad was over his right eye.  His trousers were rolled high above two well-worn shoes. Bressette stood at the foot of an improvised stairway, putting in the steep river bank, and directed his customers to his work of art.

Near the art, elevated on a box, lay an upturned hat, wherein visitors could drop their contributions. Business was not entirely to the artist’s liking. He only received $9.50 for all of that work.






## Poor Mike the Janitor!

Pat Thielen worked as a bouncer at the St. Paul House in Shakopee. The St. Paul House was located across the street from the Stans Museum. The location is now an outside volleyball court.

When Pat was off duty as a bouncer, a man lost quite a bit of money in the slot machines at the St. Paul House. This was probably in the 1920s or 1930s. The man was upset, and decided to go to the sheriff and demand that he arrest Frank Wampach, who owned the St. Paul House, for having gambling devices.









"The Sheriff went down to the Saint Paul House and found the place full of slot machines, which I'm sure, was no surprise to him," said Pat Thielen. "Nonetheless, he had no alternative but to arrest Frank Wampach."

At that time, the sheriff had not brought any equipment along with him in order to confiscate the machines. The sheriff looked around. He saw the janitor, Mike Regan, and he deputized him to watch over the slot machines until the sheriff returned with some proper equipment.

About an hour later, the sheriff returned with the equipment. He found Mike, the janitor, tied up on the couch, and all of the slot machines were gone. No slots, no money, no proof. The only witness was Mike, and he had no corroboration. And so, no one got arrested.

**(Some information from Robert George Thielen: The Legend of "Pat" Thielen by the Shakopee Heritage Society, 2007. The book is available from the Shakopee Heritage Society or at the Stans Museum in downtown Shakopee, near the place that used to be the St. Paul House!)**




Don't forget to look at the 400 people who lived in Shakopee at shakopeeheritage.org.

And make sure to check the Pathways of Shakopee History self-tour, located on the west part of Memorial Park!



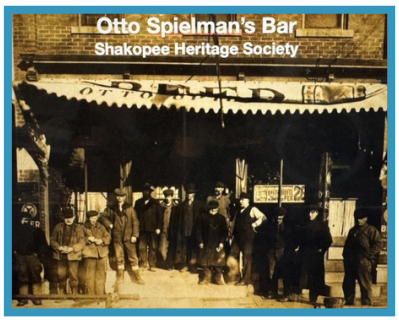
# Otto Spielman Bar

Here is a story by Donna Miles Lane, a member of the Shakopee Heritage Society:

“Many years ago there was one bar in Shakopee for approximately every 100 people, and one of those bars was owned by my great-grandfather Otto Spielman. Actually, I think it was built by his father Otto, Sr. It was along the alley across from where Bill’s Toggery is now. The fire house was next to it and the Pelham Hotel was behind those 2 buildings. Eventually his daughter and her husband, Jack & Louise (Spielman) McCaffrey took over ownership and at some time the name was changed to the Silver Dollar.”

“My mother Florence (McCaffrey) Miles and her sister Louise (McCaffrey) Paul told us an interesting story about the bar. It was during the time of Prohibition that my grandparents owned it and the family lived upstairs. They kept the illegal booze upstairs and ran tubing down through the walls with a spigot attached to the hinges in the doors in the bar. They would use these spigots to serve drinks to their customers but if they got a report of police officials coming to check for illegal booze, they would turn off the spigots, shut the doors and everyone suddenly would have nothing but pop in their glasses when the officials arrived. It was said that they knew the officers because they were the only ones that wore suits!”






“Another story that I was told was that Mom was the prettiest girl in town and of course she helped in the bar. A young highway patrolman, Don Miles, was stationed in Shakopee and stayed in the Pelham Hotel. Of course he would walk around the corner when he was off work and visit the bar—this was after Prohibition. So now I know how my parents met and were married in 1937.”







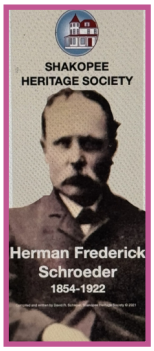
***Rhythm on the Rails*** in downtown Shakopee was a fun time for all. The Shakopee Heritage Society, along with the Scott County Historical Society, had a booth during the summer concert series.
Thanks for the help to SHS members who helped, including Sandy Olson, Liz Lundin, Joanne Musick, Melissa Whiting, Jeff and Candace Williamson, and David Schleper.





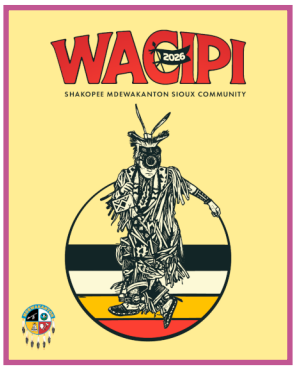



One new bag for $10 (members $8) includes a soap of brick, a button, and a brochure on *Herman Frederick Schroeder 1854-1922* and *The Bricks*.

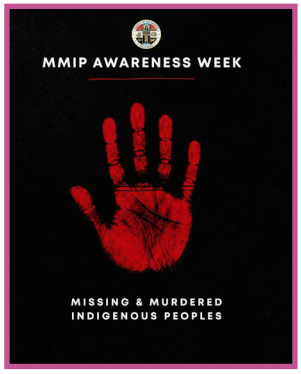









The Mdewakanton Sioux Community Wacipi will happen August 14, 2026 at 7 p.m. and August 15, 2026 at 1 and 7 p.m. Free for all to attend. It features beautiful dancing, inspiring regalia, and delicious food!








**Shakopee Heritage Society**
**2109 Boulder Pointe**
**Shakopee, MN 55379**
**President**: David R. Schleper
**Vice-President**: Sandy Olson
**Treasurer**: Liz Lundin **Secretary**: Joanne Musick
**Trustees**: Dave Regan, Melissa Whiting, Jeff and Candace Williamson

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