

**OLD EXETER AND THE SUGAR RIVER DIGGINGS**

**by Dwayne L. Marty**

**1977**

The original lead miners in Exeter Township were the Sac Indians. By the time of the Wisconsin lead rush of the 1820's the mines had been taken over by the Winnebagoes, but were known to them, and subsequently to some of the early white men, as the Old Sac Diggings.

There were two Winnebago villages within present Green County when the first white men came. White Breast had a settlement twelve to fifteen miles south of Exeter. Spotted Arm's village was located somewhere around the place where Dayton now stands, which puts it within Exeter Township. Neither village exceeded ten houses. The Winnebagoes were sedentary and agricultural in comparison with their Sac predecessors. Spotted Arm's women worked large cornfields and gardens and gathered wild foods, such as turtle eggs. The men were hunters.

The Indians didn't have much use for lead until the days of the French fur trade when they began acquiring firearms. Then it was the women who became miners. They worked the float (or surface) mineral and pockets of lead ore. Occasionally, they threw tree trunks into crevices, burned the trunk in order to heat the surrounding rock, and then poured cold water on the rock, which would crack and break loose. They also did some smelting in crude earth furnaces.

Sometime in the mid-1820's, an Irishman named Burke discovered the Old Sac Diggings and thus became the first white man in Green County. When he returned to the white settlements, he spread the word, and in 1827 McNutt and Boner built a log trading post on the east line of the northeast quarter of section 34 of Exeter Township and went into business trading whiskey and trinkets for lead ore. They were assisted in this enterprise by a Dutch interpreter named Van Sickle. The ore was transported to Galena by way of Mineral Point and Shullsburg over an old Indian trail.

One night in 1828, McNutt got drunk and chopped up Boner with an axe. Van Sickle fled to Blue Mounds on horseback. McNutt showed up at Moore's tavern in Blue Mounds, still drunk, at about the same time that Van Sickle arrived. A whiskey trader named John Duncan and William Deveise tied up McNutt and he was eventually delivered to officers at Dodgeville. From there he was taken to Prairie du Chien where he was confined by the commanding officer at Ft. Crawford. After a year and a half in jail, his trial finally came up. McNutt claimed to have no knowledge (which, considering his constant state of intoxication, may have been true) of the murder. Van Sickle's testimony against him was effectively nullified by the account of Jacob Hunter, who described the Dutchman as a champion liar. After the trial, Van Sickle complained, "they brought in that bloody Jake Hunter to swear against me, and he's as damned a liar as I am myself." McNutt was acquitted and promptly disappeared. Boner's remains were discovered the day after the murder by Kirkendoll, Blackmore and other miners, and buried at a spot which is now unknown.

Soon after Boner's murder, William Deveise went down to the cabin at Exeter to dig and trade, becoming Green County's first permanent white resident. Deveise was born in Pocahontas County, Virginia, near Huntersville, on March 16, 1793. In 1826 he went west with the intention of going surveying in Arkansas, but as he progressed further west he heard that Arkansas was sickly country and headed north instead. He walked from Cairo to Vandalia (where the Illinois legislature was in session) and spent the winter in Vandalia. He arrived at St. Louis in the spring of 1827 by wagon and, from there

traveled by steamboat to Des Moines Rapids. By March 28, he had walked to Shullsburg, where he mined for a year with Jimmy Hawthorne. In 1828 DeVeise moved on to the mines at Blue Mounds. There he heard about the Old Sac Diggings. In July of 1828, he made his first reconnaissance of what were then to be popularly known as the Sugar River Diggings. He returned to Blue Mounds for supplies and, on August 12 he was back with two employees—William Wallace and J.R. Blackmore. The three of them dug ore for the rest of that year and were joined by more miners that winter. In the spring of 1829, DeVeise erected a smelter and did a lively business all that summer. He planted a turnip patch and, in the fall, drove hogs up to the diggings from Fulton and Peoria Counties in Illinois. In 1830 he expanded his farming operation by breaking 16 acres of sod and planting turnips, corn, pumpkins and oats. After the Black Hawk War, DeVeise sold his smelter to John Dougherty, but remained at Exeter, and by 1836 was a wealthy man. In 1837, the Jackson administration's financial policies brought on a depression and DeVeise was ruined. It is said that he went through as much as \$40,000 in the lead business. He began drinking heavily after that and worked as a common miner until about 1850. In later years he made his home on the Hollis Crocker farm, west of Belleville in Montrose Township in Dane County. By that time he had sworn off alcohol but remained a heavy smoker. He walked a mile to the Montrose church every Sunday until 1879, when he became bedridden. He died in 1885.

In 1829, the Winnebagoes sold all of their lands between the Mississippi, Wisconsin and Sugar Rivers to the United States and in 1832, the remainder was sold. Exeter was surveyed by John Mullet, J. W. Stephenson and Lorin Miller between 1832 and January of 1834. The township is located at Township 4 north and Range 8 east of the 4th principal meridian. The early surveys designated a spot on the south line of the southeast quarter of section 27 as "old diggings" and "diggings" were put on the east line of the northeast quarter of section 34. On June 26, 1834, Wisconsin was divided into the Green Bay and Wisconsin Land Districts. Exeter was in the Wisconsin Land District and in 1835, public sales were held in Mineral Point. The land that was unsold at that time was then open to private entry at \$1.25 per acre. In 1844, one third of Green County was entered and much of the rest was soon bought up by New England speculators. Exeter was platted in 1843. The political township of Exeter was organized at a meeting on April 3, 1849. 39 votes were cast.

Exeter is situated on the edge of the driftless area. The diggings and village were about a mile from the Sugar River in gravelly hills and morainal deposits. The land was wooded but interspersed with large areas of natural prairie. Elizabeth Moore Wallace (7)\* says, "There was something strange about the underground veins of water in those limestone hills.... springs might gush forth in any ditch or mineral hole; and again a man might dig several wells on a farm and get no water." \* *designates number corresponding to bibliographical source*

In the first years of digging at Exeter, many of the miners lived in holes dug into the hillside directly south of the present Donald Roe farm buildings. They used barrels, with the ends knocked out, for chimneys. Provisions had to be hauled in from Galena. On one occasion, a miner named Slater walked the 28 miles to Blue Mounds, paid \$2 for a bushel of potatoes and carried them back to Exeter on his back. It was doubtless experiences such as this which prompted many of the miners to become part-time gardeners and

farmers; plus the fact that, even at that early date, there was a demand for such produce in the developing towns to the east and west.

The miners were largely an unkempt lot, "careless of their clothes as wolves. They amused themselves by drinking great quantities of whiskey and by playing Euchre, Faro, Poker and 7-up. The arrival of a white woman was regarded as a big event.

The lead that they dug up was used primarily for white paint, with a small percentage being used by the military and others for bullets. White lead became scarce during the War of 1812 when imports were cut off from England and domestic sources were sought out and developed. In Wisconsin, the lead was dug on government land, so the miner owned whatever he dug up.

To find lead the miners looked for old Indian diggings, float mineral, oddly shaped hills and depressions and a plant called Masonic weed or mineral flower. Supposedly this bluish-purple weed grew directly over lead, and some believed that its roots went down as far as 50 feet to the mineral. It was called "Masonic," perhaps derogatorily, because it revealed a "secret mine".

Two or three men could sink a shaft four to five feet square and twenty to forty feet deep. Wooden cribbing was installed in the shaft to prevent cave-ins. Horizontal or drift tunnels were then dug to the north and south in order to hit the veins of mineral which generally ran east and west. Pillars of live rock were left as supports. The tools of the men in the tunnels included picks, shovels, gads (a pointed bar), crowbars, hand drills, blasting powder, fuses, and candles stuck in gobs of clay. They gathered the ore into a tub at the bottom of the vertical shaft which was then hauled up with a windlass manned by two men. They wore heavy shoes, felt hats, hickory shirts, jackets, called "wamuses," and overalls made of bedticking. The lead was washed in sluice boxes and taken to the smelting furnace. It had to be broken into small particles before it was melted over a wood or charcoal fire. The molten metal was collected in a reservoir and ladled into molds. When it hardened into "pigs" it was ready for transport to the Mississippi or Lake Michigan.

Aside from Col. Hamilton's ill-fated experiments with boating lead down the Pecatonica from Wiota (the boats sank), the lead was hauled from the mines by ox wagons on the lead road. In the late 20's and early 30's most of the lead was shipped on the Mississippi out of Galena, but in the late 30's transportation to the East became more economical with the increased use of the Erie Canal. In those days, teams were going back and forth from Mineral Point to Milwaukee every day. They carried lead east, and immigrants and provisions west. The trip took four days one way.

It was a trail of mud and ruts and bogs. Sixteen oxen were often required to drag the heavy loads through the muck. Picks and shovels were carried along in order to dig ramps through riverbanks. The road was so bad that William Deweise is reputed to have used eight oxen to pull a buggy to Milwaukee in wet weather. When the going was hard, the freight charge was increased from 50c per hundred pounds to \$1.50. The drivers were noted for their whip cracking and swearing abilities. Occasionally they were treed by wolves in the New Glarus Woods (which stretched for miles and was called the loneliest stretch on the lead road) and oxen were sometimes killed. During this same period a weekly stage carried mail over the same route.

In 1830, the residents of Exeter included Joseph Kemp, Jno. Kemp, William Collins,

Pierce Bradley (who had modernized the village by building another log shanty), Bradley's Indian wife, Michael Welsh, Lewis and Alex Pillgoir, and "Old Motts" (a government gunsmith with the Indians) and his two Halfbreed daughters, and a Negro who had previously been a servant of General Cass. The price of lead dropped that year from \$80 per ton to a low figure and for a while Exeter was nearly deserted. Deveise did manage to keep four employees though. The next year John Dougherty started a trading cabin at Exeter.

No fort was ever built at Exeter because it was too far away from the centers of mining activity. For this reason, Exeter was completely evacuated when the Black Hawk War began. In May of 1832, the local Winnebagoes told Dougherty's halfbreed wife of recent battles in southern Wisconsin, and the place was entirely emptied of inhabitants by that same evening. They left everything behind, including tools, merchandise and 30,000 pounds of lead. Many of the supplies and tools were buried, but of the supplies that were dug up year later the only thing that survived well was a barrel of "metheglin" or fermented honey. The refugees left with a broken-down yoke of oxen and the running gear of a buggy (the good wagons and oxen were in Galena with lead). Most of them went to Galena but Deveise went to Wiota and joined the militia. He helped build the blockhouse there, and was a scout, messenger and combat soldier, being paid a dollar a day for himself and his horse.

The lead road was deserted that summer, except for troop movements. In late June, Henry Dodge's Rangers rendezvoused at Exeter with Captain Stephenson's company from Green Bay. The next day Dodge, Gratoit and Hamilton conferred with Spotted Arm, near present Dayton, in an effort to enlist the Winnebagoes on their side, but Spotted Arm preferred neutrality. At the end of the war, Gen. Atkinson's troops, which included future presidents Zachary Taylor and Jefferson Davis, very likely used the lead road on their way home, (11) and thus would have passed through Exeter.

After the battle of Bad Axe, a weary Deveise and Dougherty returned to Exeter, to find it completely burned out. Deveise, in his old age, attributed the destruction of Exeter to Edward Beouchard, whom he described as being revengeful and boastful. Beouchard claims (1) that he was gone from the area for a year or more and theorizes that the local Indians did it, citing the constant Indian troubles that he and Deveise had between 1828 and 1832 (the Indians stole the miner's ropes and threw windlasses down the shafts). Deveise's reticence on the subject of any partnership with Beouchard (8) and his insistence on Beouchard's guilt leaves it a moot issue. At any rate, by September 1 Deveise had Exeter rebuilt, the price of lead was back up and plenty of hay was stored for the winter.

1833 was the year that Deveise sold out to Dougherty. In 1834, Thomas Welch and his wife, known as Mother Welch, opened a tavern in Exeter. They were both fond of whiskey, but tried to hide the habit from each other. She is supposed to have downed 3-5 drinks before breakfast every day. She was well known from Galena to Milwaukee as a woman who had gone through five husbands and as an accomplished oxen-driver. In 1835 Kemp and Collins bought out Dougherty and started to farm on 600 acres south of the diggings. Exeter was again partially deserted in 1838 when excitement about "new" diggings at Blue Mounds lured many miners north. By 1838, all but a few straggling Winnebagoes were gone from Green County, the bulk of the tribe having been removed

to west of the Mississippi. Charles Stevens built a log tavern and a second furnace in 1839 or 1840, attracting more miners.

The 1830's were the beginning of takeover of agriculture in Green County. Andrew Clarno had started his farming settlement in the southern part of the county by 1830. In the middle of the decade, James Slater became the third farmer in Exeter (after Deveise and Kemp and Collins) and was soon followed by many others. Robert Oliver began farming to the north of Exeter, on what is now the Oral Ace farm, during this period. Oliver's wife, Madeline, was a sister of Peter Rindesbacher, an artist with a considerable talent for depicting the Indians and pioneers of the upper Mississippi valley. The Rindesbachers were part of a Swiss colony which migrated from the Red River country of Canada when they were forced out by Indian trouble, floods and grub worm plagues. Madaline Oliver thus became the first Swiss to settle in Green County. During 1845 and 1846, a large colony of Swiss people settled at New Glarus, about 8 miles west of Exeter. They bought their first cattle in Exeter from stock brought up from Ohio by drovers.

John Stewart was the first farmer in York Township, two townships west of Exeter. Writing to her brother back in Ohio in an effort to entice him into farming in Green County, Adeline Stewart wrote in 1842 that there were only seven farms in the area and all of them Yankees. A farmer could keep as much stock as he wanted, just for the work of putting up enough hay for the winter. Hogs kept fat in the woods all winter with just a little supplemental corn. It was good country for flax and sheep and for hunting, fishing and mineral. By June 9, 1849, she was writing that he should have come to Wisconsin three years before because it was starting to get crowded. There were 25-30 families settled there by then. Her husband had gotten forty bushels of wheat to the acre the year before and had 60 acres plowed then. They had 23 sheep, 3 mares, 2 colts and 70 hogs. And she was kept busy with her loom. On July 27, she writes that the wheat was ready for shocking and on October 30, she comments "people are flocking here from all over the world".

Quite a bit of the land was in timber owned by outside speculators. The local settlers disapproved of these absentee owners and felt quite free to use the timber. Speculator's lumber fenced many of the farms, heated the houses and kept the sawmills going.

Irish Hollow, three miles west of Exeter, was settled around 1850 by refugees from the potato famine and other Irishmen, just looking for a new start. John Lynn had a Mexican War veteran's land grant for 160 acres. It took many of the other Irish a few years to save the \$50 needed for forty acres in Exeter. Elizabeth Moore Wallace (7), who arrived in Irish Hollow at about this time, says she was disappointed when she saw the tiny log huts that the Irish farmers were living in. She also comments that all the wells were dug by hand in that antebellum period, drilling rigs being too expensive. The Widow Mahar's husband had been killed when a rock fell on him while digging a well near Exeter.

In January of 1840, there was a bounty of \$3 on wolf scalps. Green County had a large wolf population. At night, the howling of the wolves plus the howling of the local dogs created a terrific racket. J. R. Crocker (1) relates that while cutting hay on the Sugar River flats (living at the time on boiled redhorse instead of meat) he saw a white wolf the size of a pony. Deveise (8) states that a man at Exeter named Foreman set wolf traps in a circle with bait in the middle. A Mrs. Powell's dog got caught and started yapping; she

came to the rescue and got caught herself. Pierce Bradley's big black dog was attracted by the commotion and likewise got trapped. Foreman eventually got there and set all three loose. In addition to the wolf menace, there were plentiful badgers, panthers, lynxes, wildcats, catamounts, polecats and rattlesnakes to contend with.

According to Deveise's account, the early '40's were the high point of Exeter's career. Businesses were being built, houses were going up and lots of money was changing hands. A few bridges were built on the Sugar River and more settlers were coming in. Another tavern was being operated by Ezra Durgin, doing a good business in whiskey. The first school was opened (a log structure), the post office was started with Thomas Somers as postmaster, the first hotel was being operated by Brainerd Blodgett (who also sold whiskey), and Exeter cemetery was laid out as a federal cemetery. There were enough people in town to drink up five tons of coffee per year. The population was around 200.

J. R. Crocker, on a claim hunting trip with an uncle in June of 1842, stopped overnight in Exeter and described the town after sundown as being full of drunken bachelors. The same year, Hollis Crocker came to Exeter at the age of 14 from the east part of "York State". He says the first thing he saw there was three men assisting a fourth man to the polls amid drunken "curses and froth" (1). He goes on to express reservations about the intelligence of the man's vote.

He also met "Devil" John Armstrong that day. Armstrong had earned his nickname by riding a horse into a Galena restaurant when he wasn't served fast enough. Armstrong drunkenly offered to put up Crocker and his companions for the night, or for as long as they wanted to stay. They only stayed one night when they found out that Armstrong was making his wife and children sleep in the corncrib on their account.

A dance at Exeter in 1842 was attended by people from as far away as Beloit. After supper, the table was removed and they danced 2 sets at a time until dawn. The 1843 Fourth of July celebration was highlighted by an oration by the "Wild Yankee" who stood on a whiskey barrel while Thomas Somers manned the faucet.

Frank King (21) writes of man living at Exeter at this approximate time who had two wives. Both wives made husk mats and rugs and sold them in Mineral Point.

The village had acquired a blacksmith in the early part of the decade and three stores. In 1846 Thomas Somers built the first frame house and Charles George opened another hotel. There was a grist mill, similar to a Dutch windmill, near town, a wool-carding establishment and a distillery. Enough cattle and hogs were fed on the distillery residue to keep several men busy all winter butchering. 133 votes were cast at the Sugar River Precinct (Exeter) in 1848.

The '40's saw the rise of Exeter's first close rival—Attica (or Winnesheik as it was called then). A sawmill there was quickly followed by other water-powered mills which Exeter's puny creek couldn't compete with. After 1847, Wisconsin's lead production began to be surpassed (and replaced) by lead from Colorado and California. The California gold rush of 1849 severely decimated the ranks of Exeter's miners. Most of them never returned. George Magee, who ran the store, which still stands on the Walt Haddinger farm, and who owned a 500-acre farm, came back with breastpins made of gold nuggets for his daughters. Frank Jordan (32) recalls that John Ferguson's farm was paid for with California gold.

After 1850, Joseph Green's flouring mill in Dayton, four miles to the north, started a rather rapid shift of commerce from Exeter to Dayton. The mines continued on for some time, but the lead was in the process of running out. Elizabeth Moore Wallace ((23) and (7)) remembers Exeter as being still the most pretentious settlement in the area, but running down at the heels fast, because the mining had practically ceased and other towns were growing up around gristmills on the river. Joe Brayton, the Exeter hotelkeeper who greeted the Moores on their arrival in the village, was prospering mainly because he was in the land business, and therefore not effected by the decline of the mineral business.

In 1850, Exeter had 22 dwellings, 2 stores and 104 inhabitants (6). In 1856, the last hotel closed, although the proprietor, James Hayden, lived there for many years thereafter. In 1857, Deveise's furnace was just a heap of cinders and ashes (1).

In 1860, a large comet was visible from Wisconsin, and was believed to be a sign of war. A fugitive slave in Irish Hollow thought it was the hand of God pointing to Illinois, commanding the people to vote for Lincoln. And in 1861, the few remaining miners left to join the Confederate Army and they never came back either.

For a while after the rise of Dayton, township meetings were held alternately in Dayton and Exeter, until finally they were held exclusively in Dayton. One of the old hotels was used for dances and social gatherings for years after mines closed. Frank Jordan (born in 1878) remembers the building as having "lots of rooms in it". It was torn down and the lumber reused for farm buildings.

I have found conflicting reports on the date of the demise of the Exeter post office. Most sources list the date as being in 1871, but the Wisconsin State Gazeteer says that Exeter had a post office (and George Magee's store) in 1879. The 1886 edition has Exeter listed as " a discontinued post office in Green County, send mail to Attica". In 1884 (1), Exeter had less than half a dozen houses, but it did have a nearly new school, valued (with furniture) at \$665 and with 48 pupils. A Limburger factory was started at Exeter in 1887. Water was carried from the cheese factory to the school for drinking.

Vincent Eagen (30) remembers that a great many mineral holes in section 34 were filled in by hand by a farmer named Burki. Years later, a tractor nearly fell in a 30-foot deep hole uncovered by the plow. A man named Horn sank a 40-foot shaft, within Eagen's memory, with the idea of resuming mining, but apparently the idea petered out. Road crews have occasionally gotten fill and gravel from pits located among some of the remaining mineral holes.

On Sunday August 11, 1940, an old settler's reunion was held at old Exeter. My paternal grandparents were among those who attended. The people spent the day eating from lunch baskets, listening to a program put on by the county historical society and trading stories about Indian shootouts, etc.

The third and newest schoolhouse was sold on March 27, 1953 to Jacob Trumpy, who moved it to his farm and used it as a hired man's habitation. Consolidation was voted for on August 13, 1953.

The old diggings in section 27 are still there, but the present owners are talking about bulldozing them in order to get more cropland. When I was younger (before my father sold that part of his land), I spent a lot of time, which I was supposed to be devoting to chopping thistles, sitting in the shade of the scrubby trees that grow out of some of the mineral holes. I still like to walk back there and meditate among the old sheep bones and

glittering lead nuggets.

George Magee's store and residence are still standing, as is the second (1880's) schoolhouse. The foundation of the larger hotel has been incorporated into Donald Roe's hog house. Near that hog house, there are some remains of other foundations and an extremely gnarled lilac bush. The old livery barn was still standing not so many years ago, and sometimes, when the grass is just right in the spring, you can still see the ruts of the old lead trail.

#### COMMENTS

There is a persistent legend (both in the literature and in oral statements) that Exeter missed being the county seat by one vote. The closest I have come to finding evidence for this idea is the story about the Exeter miners being induced to vote on the side of New Mexico (Monroe) by being given some of Mrs. Rust's popular braided hats. This was in the third election on the issue, held in August of 1839. Harold Cate considers the legend hogwash (29) (or words to that effect). John Schindler's opinion sounds reasonable to me. "Exeter could easily have become the county seat if her citizens had made serious claim, for her population outnumbered all the rest of the county. Its position off to one side of the county rendered it inadvisable that Exeter be the seat of the new county and it was not considered. (11)"

The writing of this paper has been an attempt to extract truth and meaning from a mass of contradictory and inexact information, and in some cases, the effort has probably been futile.

Dwayne L. Marty  
Exeter Township  
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26. Letters by Adeline Stewart of Green County to her brother, George Robinson in Ohio; June 18, 1842; June 9, 1849 and October 30, 1849, originals at the State Historical Society of Wisconsin Archives

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The first settlement in Green County was at Exeter, in 1827. The name was taken from the mining area in Exeter, England. The first man to come was an Irishman named Burke, who was going through the country and found the Indians taking out lead ore. The first permanent settler was William Deviese.

Mining of lead caused an increase in population, consequently the platting of Exeter Village. It had three hotels, a store, and a Post Office established in 1841. In 1871, the Post Office was discontinued, with the decline of the town.

The first religious services were held in Exeter in 1829. A miner, who was a preacher also, was always ready, willing, and able to instruct his fellow miners in spiritual matters, and in those early years, the voice of prayer would occasionally be heard among the hardy miners at Exeter. The records do not show that a church was ever erected.

The first school in Exeter Township was taught in a log house, in the Exeter mining settlement, in 1840.

Exeter was the voting place for Green County for years, being known as the Sugar River Precinct. When a vote was cast for the county seat, Exeter lost to Monroe by one vote.

Although Exeter was a flourishing community in the early days, today there is nothing left but the schoolhouse and the cemetery.

Cate began our tour in Attica, "one of the few towns in Wisconsin and the only one in Southwest Wisconsin that ever had a legal whiskey distillery (1846)."

Attica, through which the Sugar River runs, is the perfect counterpoint to Exeter. The town is only 3 or 4 years younger than Exeter, but the river is what matters, as Cate explained: "Exeter had to die; it didn't have a water source."

Not that the old mining town, located just below the old lead road from Milwaukee to Galena, didn't have any water. It did.

"There was a little stream, a constant stream, running through the town," explained Cate. "But, with only enough water for drinking. Everyone could go out and get a pail of water."

Today on Feller Road, off Green County Trunk D, what used to be the once thriving mining town of Exeter is now part of the Donald Roe farm. On Exeter's old East Main Street, the foundation of Roe's hog barn dates back to one of Exeter's three hotels. Another hotel used to be just up Main Street. The top of the ridge overlooking Exeter marks the location of the old mining road. At one time, Exeter was one of the few towns

on that road between Milwaukee and Galena—

"The lead road came right over that ridge there," Cate pointed out. "Dwayne Marty said that when he was a child, up there by that single old tree along the ridge — when the ground had been compacted enough in the spring — you could see where the wheel ruts were 150 years ago." Marty is the author of "Old Exeter and The Sugar River Diggings," a work to which this story is indebted.

"There were three hotels," Cate went on, "and, for a number of years, Exeter and Dayton alternated in being the location for the township's annual meeting. They're held in the town hall in Dayton now, but, the original ones were always held in taverns."

It's hard to believe, as you drive down Exeter's old Main Street past Roe's hog barn, that this was once a thriving town built around the old Sac Indian lead diggings, dating far before an Irishman named Burke "discovered" them sometime in the 1820s and McNutt and Boner build the first log cabin at Exeter in 1827. Yet, according to Marty's history, "the early 1840s were the high point of Exeter's career. Businesses were being built, houses were going up and lots of money was changing hands. The first school was opened, the post office was started, the first hotel was being operated by Brainerd Blodgett, who also sold whiskey, and Exeter cemetery was laid out as a federal cemetery. There were enough people in town to drink up five tons of coffee per year. The population was around 200."

By 1850, with the advent of Joseph Green's flourmill in Dayton, Exeter's population was 104. In 1856, the last hotel closed and by the time of the Civil War, the last miners had departed, according to Marty, "to join the Confederate Army."

Out at the Exeter Federal Cemetery, Cate explained the why and wherefore of the "Federal" part of that name.

"The story is," he began, "and I do not vouch for the truth of it, that within a fairly short time after the War of 1812, before much recorded history was put down in this area, some regular U.S. Army soldiers came through here. They ran into something, an epidemic of one sort or another and seven of them died and were buried in unmarked graves in what is now the Exeter Federal Cemetery. There probably are several older cemeteries in Wisconsin, in the Green Bay, Shullsburg or Prairie du Chien areas, but this is within three to four years of those."

Not quite chronologically, we ended up at George Magee's old store and residence, both still standing and remarkably well preserved on the Walter Haddinger farm outside Exeter.

"No one has lived in the old house since the mid-1960s anyway," Cate offered. "It did have running water, electricity, a bathroom. In fact, it was quite modernized.

"The second floor of the store was the dance hall and community meeting place," he continued. "After George Magee built the house and store, he went to California in 1849 and dug gold. He came back and brought some nuggets, which he had set in brass pins. His daughters always wore them proudly."