

# Valley Grove Preservation Society News

## *A Note from our President*

I am privileged to have a strong board with which to collaborate as we care for the “old” 1862 stone church, the “new” 1894 wood church, and the surrounding oak savanna restoration. The all-volunteer support the Valley Grove site receives is truly a marvel, each board member contributing a special skill or two or three to the effort to care for the place. Some of us do land maintenance, and get to enjoy a magnificent view as we work cutting invasive plants on the restoration. Others contribute to writing and building our new web page and our occasional newsletters, managing finances, guiding repairs, refurbishment, and maintenance of buildings, preparing for and helping with events. We all try to plan for the long view of how to exercise tender loving care that respects the historical legacy of the settlers and early leaders. Lest you forget, the work VGPS does on site is strongly complemented by the work of the Valley Grove Cemetery Association. They care for the cemetery grounds per se, prune trees, reposition older headstones needing attention, and hold an annual workday.

VGPS board now consists of 11, with two new members being elected April 2014. They are Andy Franklin and Lee Skaar. A bit about each can be seen elsewhere in this newsletter.

As always, your support in any and all forms is much appreciated. Without you the VGPS board would be very limited in our capacity to do the right things to maintain and enhance Valley Grove. Remember, no gift is too large or too small!

Preparation is underway by VGPS for our lovely Fall Country Social. Don't miss the festivities, this year slated to occur on

**Sunday, September 14, 1-4 PM.**

See you there.

Gary Wagenbach  
President, VGPS



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## Our Annual Country Social

Our annual country social has been enjoyed for over 10 years now. If you have never attended a country social we would love to have you be a part of the magic of Valley Grove! Traditional music, prairie beauty and old time pleasures are the heart of our annual Valley Grove Country Social which will be held this year on Sunday, Sept. 14 from 1 to 4 p.m.

So if you are wondering what happens at our social here is a peek. A variety of musicians will perform outside (weather permitting) on the historic grounds in addition to the hum of the old pipe organ in the clapboard church. Our featured musical performer at this year's social will be organist **Theo Wee** of Northfield. She will give a special concert beginning at 2 p.m. Theo is a retired faculty member of St. Olaf College and the organist at First United Church of Christ, Northfield. Being very familiar with our organ, Theo will demonstrate the organ's full capabilities with her concert.

As with previous country socials, we plan to have prizes, horse-drawn wagon rides, goat-milking, bluebird and butterfly education, traditional rope making, music, refreshments, and prairie walks on the scenic land surrounding the churches.

Coffee and refreshments will be served. Admission is free, with tax-deductible donations to the Valley Grove Preservation Society encouraged.

## Tales of Christmas Past at Valley Grove

*Christmas Eve 2013—Recalled by Ken Sahlin in an interview with Karin Winegar*

"I have been involved with Christmas Eve services since 1995. We don't cancel it often, and we try to do so early if we must. It was an easy decision to cancel the service in 2009 because at least 10 inches of new snow fell during the day, and the storm was not letting up.

"This past December 24, however, the parking lot was plowed and ready, but then around 7 PM, snow began to fall in the valley. Board members phoned each other to confer: hold the service or not? If not, how do we reach people who might intend to drive out to the churches despite the storm? It was almost impossible to call off service that late, so we went ahead.

"At 9 o'clock Kay and I drove to the church and found an additional 4 to 5" of snow clogging the church driveway. We spotted Valley Grove neighbors Travis and Michelle Roethler, whose farm faces Valley Grove, and he fired up their skid loader to re-open the drive to the parking lot.

"But first I had to get up the hill to open the doors to the white church: it took a half dozen attempts in my front wheel drive Saturn. Jo Ann Polley and her husband Mark Ulmer followed — somehow — in our tracks.

"Shortly afterward, Rev. John Gorder and his wife arrived from Northfield. I have no idea how they made it up that hill driving a rear wheel drive car.

"At 9:45 the music began with Jo Ann on the clarinet, and Kay on the flute. We were minus our organist and violinist.

"By 10 o'clock just over 50 brave people had skidded, slid, revved and chugged through the dark and the deepening snow and up the hill.

"The wind roared and snow flew around the two old churches and the oaks, but we were warm inside. We filled everyone's request at the carol sing accompanied by flute. John did a stellar job with the service, which concluded as we always do with singing 'Silent Night' by candlelight, the benediction and ringing the Valley Grove bell.

"People unpacked the sweets they had brought to share, and we had plenty of hot apple cider. It seemed as if everyone lingered a bit longer than usual before braving the drive home. As we tidied up the church for the evening, we noticed the wind had driven a miniature drift of snow through the old pointed arch windows and onto the sill. And four new 5-inch candles completely burned down due to the strong south wind.

"For many decades, members of Valley Grove Lutheran Church drove to Christmas Eve services and services throughout the winter in their cutters, sleighs and bobsleds. We're told that where the parking lot is now, there was a carriage shed that blocked the west wind so the horses could enjoy some shelter and feed while people were indoors.

## Tales of Christmas Past, continued

“They were determined to be there despite the snow, the cold and wind. And although we had it a great deal easier, and arrived from further away in many cases, so were we. It is always a worthwhile experience to share Valley Grove on Christmas Eve.”

## Treasurer’s Report

How have we been spending your deeply appreciated donations?

In 2012 we were awarded a \$7,000 Minnesota Historical and Cultural Heritage Grant through the Minnesota Historical Society to complete a Historic Structural Report. This report was completed in late September. It can be found on our website.

Last fall we installed an LP furnace in the 1894 wood church to replace our 19-year-old fuel oil furnace. It’s not only more cost efficient, it means no more oil stench. We replaced two rotted windowsills, painted the exterior window frames, doors and exterior corners of the 1894 white church.

The front screen door of the 1862 stone church was repaired and painted, and a new rear screen door was built and installed. The bell tower also received a fresh coat of paint.

This spring we applied for and received a grant for paint through the Southern Minnesota Initiative Foundation. Valspar supplied us with enough primer and paint to repaint the interior of the white church. In May the cracks were patched, and the painting was completed. This is the third time Valspar has donated paint to Valley Grove.

Also this spring River City Builders brought a 60-foot aerial lift to the Valley Grove site and located and patched a leak that was causing water damage near the rear ceiling of the 1894 church. A hole was found near the southwest corner of the bell tower. With the lift on site, the crew was also able to replace all the hail damaged shingle ridge boards.

The limestone step in front of the stone church entrance has been replaced with a smooth piece of limestone. We then added a ten foot long exposed aggregate ramp. Surrounding the concrete ramp are new limestone steppers. Topsoil brought up the grade in front of the stone church, and the grass was reseeded.

On May 27 Rutz Organ from Morristown, Minnesota tuned our historic pipe organ. While tuning, they discovered bugs in some of the pipes and mice had lunched on five of the lead pipes. Now those pipes will perform again.

## Valley Grove News

*Artist Bettye Olson*

We give special thanks to painter Bettye Johnson Olson of St Paul. In 1995 she was one of many artists invited to Valley Grove by Gretchen Quie to paint at the site. While many were focused on the churches, Olson fell in love with the oak tree and made it the subject of her paintings. In July 2014, Bettye Olson visited Valley Grove again and was impressed with our restoration work. At that time she donated two watercolors to our VGPS. They will be displayed at the country social.

*Check out our redesigned website: [valleygrovemn.org](http://valleygrovemn.org)*

Since March, board members have been meeting with web designer Matt Lauer, to expand the way we keep supporters and visitors informed about our resources and events. Besides the general categories from the old website, users will now find more detailed information about such aspects as Valley Grove history, church architecture and restoration efforts, the features of the oak savanna, and how to get involved. With the link to the Valley Grove Facebook, people will now have the opportunity to contribute photos and observations from their visits. We hope that this enhanced website will raise greater awareness about our mission and deeper appreciation for this unique historic site.

## New Board Members

**Andy Franklin** is a veteran biology and ecology teacher at Prior Lake High School and has a background in local plant ecotypes, controlled burns, biological illustration, and public education on the value of grasslands. He also enjoys carpentry and historic building restoration, having restored an 1876 barn in Iowa from the foundation up, built a cabin in northern Minnesota and designed and built the larger part of his passive solar home in Northfield. Andy met Gary Wagenbach when he was enrolled in Gary's class in wetlands ecology and volunteered to join the board.

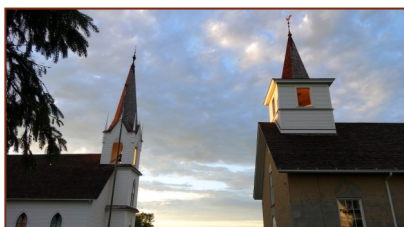
"VGPS is a good fit for my interests and background," he said. "I have a passion for the biodiversity, restoration, and maintenance of prairie ecosystems. I was married at Valley Grove five years ago and consider myself to be a steward of the land and churches there. The bucolic setting of Valley Grove is a refuge for people, plants, and animals. How wonderful to have the opportunity to be a part of it all. For the first year or two I want to be a student of VG's architecture and history, and then I will know where my thrust might be; I want to work with the board and be a team player."

**Lee Skaar** brings a range of hands-on skills and training in gardening and conservation to the Valley Grove board. Lee is an avid woodworker and enjoys landscaping and gardening. He volunteers with Rice County Habitat for Humanity, is a member of the Dundas Park and Recreation Advisory Board, as well as a board member for the Cannon River Watershed Partnership. He completed the Minnesota Master Naturalist Volunteer program, the Iowa Master Conservationist program, and the Iowa Master Gardener program.

Born and raised in Hayward, Minnesota, Lee and his wife Joyce have two adult children in Minneapolis. The couple worked in Marshalltown, Iowa, for 35 years, Lee worked in manufacturing engineering for Fisher Controls International (Fisher designs and manufactures valves and process control instrumentation for the process control industry). He was as a mechanical designer/technician then a project manager with international responsibilities. After retirement, the family moved to Dundas, Minnesota.

"My older sister, her husband and my wife and I were driving to the Nerstrand meat market and Big Woods State Park," Lee said. "And coming back we spotted a couple of steeples. So we said let's check this out, we found the driveway, and there was Valley Grove. We felt it was a pretty special place. We have a very strong Norwegian heritage and as we walked around the cemetery, we caught the Norwegian names and saw Al and Gretchen Quie's spot. We also picked up the little brochure there. I had completed the Minnesota Master Naturalist class and Gary Wagenbach had been one of our instructors. During one of my conversations with him, I found out he was on the VGPS board. Gary invited me to attend one of the VGPS board meetings and that's how I became involved."

## Valley Grove Board Members at a Glance



*Valley Grove Preservation Society Board, April 2014*

Myles Bakke  
Jennifer Cox Johnson, Secretary  
Andy Franklin  
Marlene Halverson  
Julie Klassen  
Michelle Roethler  
Ken Sahlin, Treasurer  
Lee Skaar  
Gary Stromley  
Gary Wagenbach, President  
Karin Winegar



*Valley Grove and Grace Cemetery Board, May 2014*

Blair Baalson, Sexton  
Gary Bonde, Secretary/Treasurer  
John Hellerud  
John Radtke  
Travis Roethler  
Mark Severson  
Ken Vesledahl, President