

This building is the Modern Woodman of America Hall, Camp 6190. It was built in 1897 by a group of Valton men who got together to form their own camp. The Modern Woodman was a fraternal organization much like the Moose, Elks and Oddfellows except that by joining this organization the members were eligible to buy life insurance from the Modern Woodman of America Insurance Company. The insurance came in \$500, \$1000, \$1500 and \$2000 policies and were paid promptly to widows all across the country.

The plans for this hall came from Modern Woodman in Rockford, Illinois and were used everywhere these halls were built. In the plains the buildings were built of sod; in the mountains, of rock. The men here used lumber cut on the saw mill across the valley from trees donated by members. The members also donated their time to build the hall. When it was finished they needed a drop curtain.

At about this time an itinerant, alcoholic folk artist wandered into Wonsauc looking for work. He was referred to the new Woodman's hall in Valton.

Ernst Hupeden was an educated German immigrant who had arrived in New York City from Hamburg, Germany in 1876. His whereabouts for the next 20 years are unknown except that he told tales of being in Chicago at some time prior to his arrival here. The murals in the hall here are the earliest of his work we have found.

The drop curtain on the stage (point to the curtain) depicts the sinking of the Spanish Armada in Manila Bay which happened just prior to his arrival. The use of historic events was a common practice of folk artists and heightens its interest for us today. We don't know if the murals were Ernst's idea or the Woodmans. We know that he stayed for two years. He was paid in room, board, whiskey and some money. Woodland Township has always been a dry town and is still today, so where the whiskey came from has always been a deep, dark secret. We do know that he had plenty and would often wander off drunk only to return days or weeks later with a terrible hangover and continue with his work.

He painted all four walls of the hall and the ceiling. At one time the ceiling was covered with a night sky with stars and a moon, storm clouds with lightning bolts and sunset, tinted clouds from the sunset in the back corner. The ceiling was destroyed by a leaking roof many years ago, and we can find people who only remember parts of it. It took Hupeden 2 years to complete the hall.

The murals on the walls depict the initiation rites of the brotherhood group and are similar to the initiations of all brotherhood groups. The initiation was divided into two parts, the first fun and games, the second life and death.

The mural on the back wall (point) shows a new recruit in the brown suit being welcomed for his initiation. The old man is the sage and represents wisdom. He is pointing out the benefits of belonging to this organization. The castle represents peace, security, light, the comfort of being one of a strong social group. Notice the men behind the recruit. They are smirking because they know what's ahead of him. Initiations are planned to frighten.

During the first part of the initiation the recruit was obliged to ride the goat - one of which we have - the mural shows a man with his arm in a sling but we don't know the significance of that. There were many tricks played on a recruit. One was the lung tester which is in the display case on the stage. The recruit was asked to blow as hard as he could into the mouthpiece to measure the strength of his lungs. When he blew hard enough a blank cartridge in the box exploded shooting white powder into the recruit's face. He was also asked to stand with an apple on his head while a Woodman used a rifle to shoot it off. When the Woodsman pulled the trigger, water shot out and drenched the recruit. Then it was his turn. He got to shoot an apple off the Woodman's head. This time when he pulled the trigger, water shot out backwards and drenched him again.

The second stage of the initiation dealt with life and death. A recruit was reminded again and again that he had only this one day to prepare for death. None of us know if we will see tomorrow. He wanted life insurance for his family and this is the direction the initiation takes.

It was put on as a play with the recruit as one of the players. In the first scene the recruit is draped in black to represent mourning for a friend. He is taken to the bank to beg help for the widow and children of his dead friend. The banker sits beneath the bank scene on the East wall. The recruit tells the banker of the widow's need and the banker replies, "I'm busy about my work. If this man didn't look after his family, why should I?" He is turned away and admits to the group that he doesn't have insurance either. "Never fear!" they say. "We will help you join the Woodman."

For the next scene the lights in the hall are extinguished. The recruit and his guide carry candles or small lanterns and approach Death's corner. As the recruit walked slowly across the front of the hall, his candle, his only light, Death stepped out of the door and said, "I am Death! Relentless and unsparing! I strike where I like, when I please, and whom I desire. I have remained here that I might turn you into lifeless clay. I have but to breathe on you and all that you are, or all that you hope to be shall be gone."

The guide argues with Death, begging him to reconsider. The recruit is just about to buy insurance. Let him live that long and while the argument goes on, the recruit's hair does indeed begin to stand on end as we see in the next mural. This mural represents the recruit's confrontation with death. We see the skeletons of those who didn't make it past death's corner. We see fear and suffering. The blank masks represent war, disease, injury, all the uncounted things that lead to death.

In the last scene the recruit is accepted into the camp as a "neighbor" which was the title used in the Woodman's group as a greeting. People who have lived in this area many years still greet one another as neighbor. Here we see him looking calmer; his hair is going back down. He is being brought into the circle of light, brotherhood, friendship, security, all the good things that being a member of the camp meant at that time.

The scenes on the last wall represent the Valton area of that time and Valton as the artist saw it 100 years in the future. The people and the names are actual members of the camp and people of Valton.

This is said to be a self portrait of Ernst Hupeden. (point to various people) This child is Ray Gibbons whose mother owned the hotel where the artist stayed. He brought the artist's meals to him while he worked. The woman in the door of the log cabin is most likely Mrs. Gibeaut whose husband was one of the founders of this camp, it being built on his property. His picture is on the stage. At the time the murals were being painted Mrs. Gibeaut gave birth to a son named Royal Forrest and this was the pass word used at that time to get members past the peep hole in the door.

The town scene shows names of members of the camp and businessmen of the town. Notice that Hupeden painted in a saloon and whiskey bottles in the window, but Woodland is still a dry town so he was wrong about the future all together.

The original charter of Camp 6190 is hanging on the front wall in its original frame. This has been hanging in the hall for 75 years. In a display case on the stage you will see an original cap that matches those in the murals which was also found in the hall.

After the camp disbanded the hall was used as a community building. The Valton School held programs here; dances, weddings and every kind of celebration. It was used as Town Hall of Woodland for many years. In the mid 1960's the Ronald Nash's bought the hall from Mr. Gibeaut's granddaughter, repaired the roof and kept the building as you see it today until 1980 when the Kohler Foundation of Kohler, Wisconsin took on the restoration. An entirely new foundation was put under the building, cracks in the walls were repaired, the murals were cleaned, a new roof, porch, wiring were installed and the building was presented to Sauk County in September 1982. This is now a Sauk County park. (Ask for questions).

Be sure to see the exhibits on the stage before leaving and please sign our guest book.