

Not Much Left To Prove It, But Exeter Was Boom Town

by C.B. Bylander

Walt Haddinger waded through waist high weeds as he made his way to the rickety doorway of a massive sandstone and limestone building. Once there, with the flick of a finger he unlatched the lock and took one giant step into history. He was inside what was once a county store. In its heyday, it had served the bustling town of Exeter. Now, as he gazed through cobwebs and dusty rays of sunlight, it was obvious the building is but a passive monument to the first white settlement in Green County.

"I can't really say how old this building is . . . must be well over a 100 years . . . pre Civil War days I suppose," Haddinger said as his voice echoed off the stone walls. He figures the stone house behind the store is the same age. For a while, he lived in the stone home.

"I know these buildings are on a map published in 1860 or so, but no one knows when they were built," he commented as he wandered through the musty double door store, pointing out tidbits of information with each step. A retired farmer, Haddinger is a historian of Exeter.

Haddinger has always liked history and back in 1943 he purchased a property ripe in historical value. He owns what amounts to the only buildings marking where the town of Exeter used to lie. The only other recognizable landmark is a crumbling schoolhouse off of County D

that cows now use for shelter. Haddinger's two buildings and rambling farm are about one half mile from where the town proper used to be. He lives just east of the Exeter Cemetery.

What makes Exeter rich in historical significance is that it was the first permanent white settlement in Green County. Sac Indians were the first people to tap lead from the rolling hills of Exeter. Later Winnebago's did the same. Eventually white men took over control of the mines. They shipped the lead to Galena by way of Mineral Point and Shullsburg over an old Indian trail.

Haddinger is well versed in the history of Exeter and is familiar with the story of settlers McNutt and Boner. These two came to Exeter in 1827 and built a log cabin trading post. They traded whiskey and trinkets for lead ore. A Dutch interpreter named Van Sickle assisted them.

As Haddinger wandered through his buildings, he recalled the fate of trader Boner. **"It was back in 1828 when McNutt got drunk one night and chopped Boner up with an axe,"** he calmly stated. He went on to say Van Sickle, who was frightened by witnessing the incident, fled to Blue Mounds. McNutt, who was still drunk, fired at Van Sickle and then followed him. After reaching a tavern in Blue Mounds, McNutt was arrested. But in a strange quirk of history, McNutt was acquitted. It appears Exeter's

Van Sickle was known as a champion liar and no one could actually believe his testimony. And McNutt, who apparently was drunk most of the time, testified he couldn't remember ever chopping Boner to pieces. In a frontier Prairie du Chien court, he was acquitted. The bones of Boner are buried somewhere in Exeter, but no one knows where.

Fortunately, not all of Exeter's history is so gruesome and Haddinger can easily envision more peaceful times. **"The upstairs to this place [the store] used to be a dance hall. It was just one room,"** he explained, as he seemed to envision dancers twirling about. As he peered out an open upstairs window, he commented the store probably took care of all the settlers' needs.

Haddinger's buildings were first owned by a man named George MaGee. He owned the store and lived in the stone house behind it. According to Haddinger, the Protestant-Irish MaGee spelled his name two ways. **"J. C. Steinman, they called him Cap, testified under oath that George MaGee and George Magee were one and the same person. He just spelled his name two different ways,"** Haddinger recalled with a chuckle.

In the limestone home where the MaGees used to live, Haddinger also lived for many years. It had a large parlor area and bedroom, five rooms at the top of a

steep stairway, a sitting room, a pantry and a large open kitchen. The windows have deep 16-20 inch ledges. And for some strange reason the home has three front doors. Although the foundation is giving away in a few spots, generally the house is solid as rock.

When Haddinger finally moved out, some intruders did move in. Raccoons and spiders have inherited the home.

Haddinger has had a couple of offers for the buildings, but he's never sold. One woman was interested in restoring the buildings, but he told her she'd have to restore them somewhere else. He said she could have them if she rebuilt them piece-by-piece, at a different location, but he didn't want them restored right next to him. He had another offer from a man who would have paid almost any price for them. Because he was afraid the man would accept any asking price, he just said they weren't for sale. In the back of his mind, he says he still has plans to fix them up himself.

What ever happened to Exeter? Well, as Haddinger explains it, there are two-reasons it no longer exists. **"The mines petered out and everyone moved to Dayton,"** he explained. He noted Dayton had waterpower and that was an advantage. And once the mines no longer produced healthy loads of lead ore, there was no real reason to stay.