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Residents share history of New Haven

By Kay James, Dells Events Oct 17, 2012



Residents of New Haven look over some of the materials brought by the Adams County Historical Society to the presentation Wednesday.

Kay James/Events

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By Kay James, Dells Events

The first settlers in Big Spring were living there illegally, Michael Groc, told an audience at the New Haven Town Hall, Oct. 10.

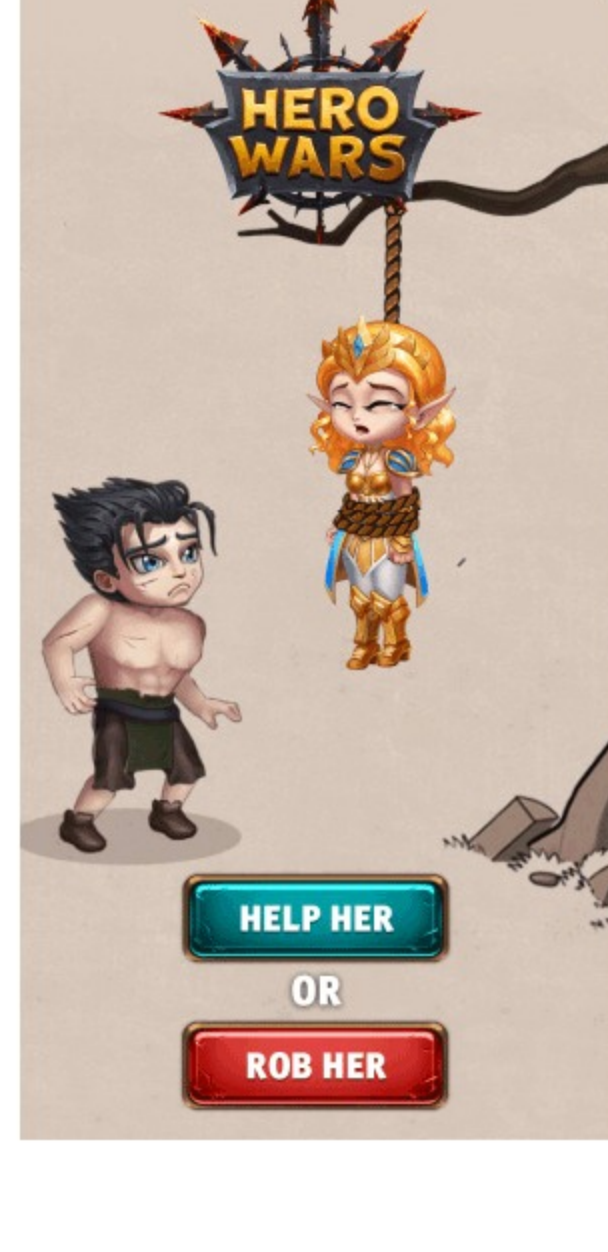
Groc and the Adams County Historical Society made a presentation about the history of New Haven Township that was first called Big Spring Township and includes the unincorporated village of Big Spring.

Settlers arrived in Big Spring or New Haven, the southern most part of Adams County in the late 1830s, but they were squatters since the land at that time still was part of the Menomomie Indian Territory. Until the land was surveyed by the federal government, which did not happen until 1851, people living on it were squatters, Groc said, and the area remained Indian territory until 1848.

One of the first settlers was Jared Walsworth, who married a Menomomie woman, and built a tavern in Big Spring on the Pinery Road. The Pinery Road started in Portage, and ran north through Big Spring to Grand Marsh and north to Nekoosa and Wisconsin Rapids. It was opened so logging could be done, Groc said.

Walsworth was a whiskey trader, Groc said, and his brother was the first mayor of Portage.

Other settlers followed Walsworth and after the federal survey those living there had to go to either Stevens Point or Mineral Point to buy their land from the federal government. The settlers had to pay cash for the land that cost \$1.25 per acre.



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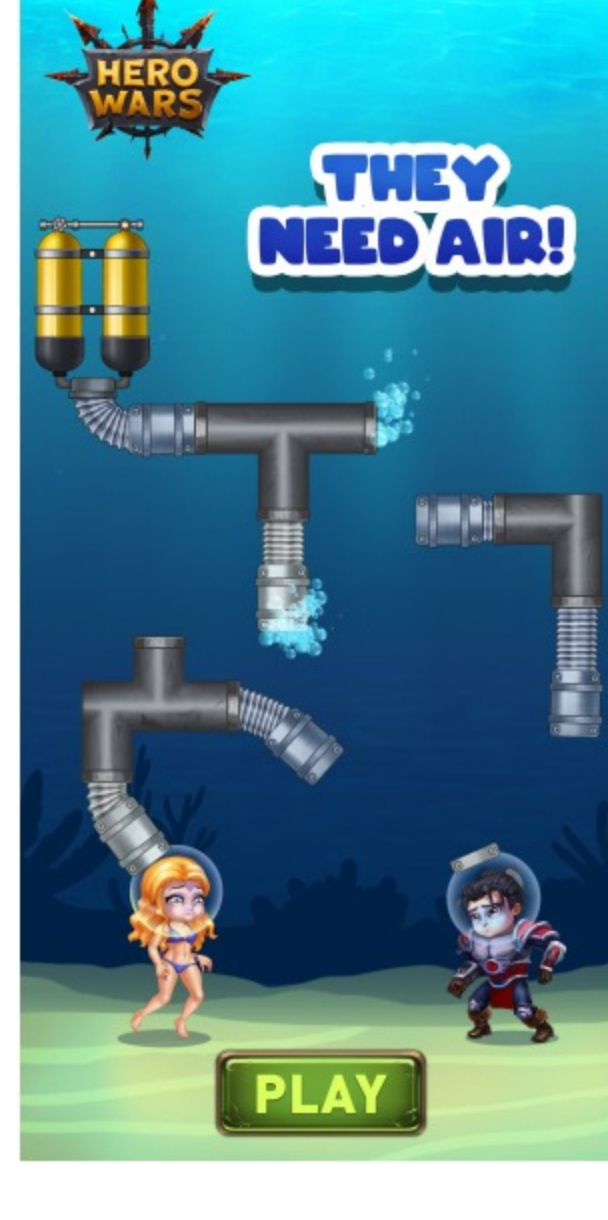
For a time, the Big Spring/New Haven part of the county was the richest part in terms of revenue to the county, Groc said, because of the rich farmland. However, it was later replaced by Adams when the railroad came through the town.

The township's name was later changed to New Haven, by the urging of a family named Best, according to Ken Crothers, one of about 50 people who attended the session. The Best family later left New Haven and moved to Dunn County where they also named a township New Haven.

Groc asked those who attended about business in the community. The community had four mills, including ones for grinding flour, a sawmill and one was a variety works making tools and machinery. The mill by the dam was burned down in 1928 by an arsonist who also burned barns and a granary. The arsonist, Charles Marshal, was caught in the act and was sent to Waupun. He returned to Big Spring when he was released.

Big Spring also had two stores, a post office, two churches, one of which still stands, two blacksmith shops and hotels.

The area had ponds where trout were raised, and Helene Vanderbilt, recalled that her grandfather Churchill would help catch the trout and place them in cans that had ice on the top. The cans of trout were loaded on a wagon pulled by a team of horses. Then the trout were taken to Coldwater Canyon Golf Resort where fresh trout was served to visitors for breakfast.



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Another question from Groc was about Native Americans in the area. The Ho Chunk who had been removed from Wisconsin by the federal government returned and some came back to Big Spring include Jake Prettyman. Prettyman owned a farm that was later owned by Joe Wheeler who acquired it for back taxes.

The township includes an area known as Indian Hill, where the Ho-Chunk often camped and had a cemetery. The area between Second Lane and County Highway G also included some mounds. Groc noted that Adams County once had more than 600 mounds. Few are left.

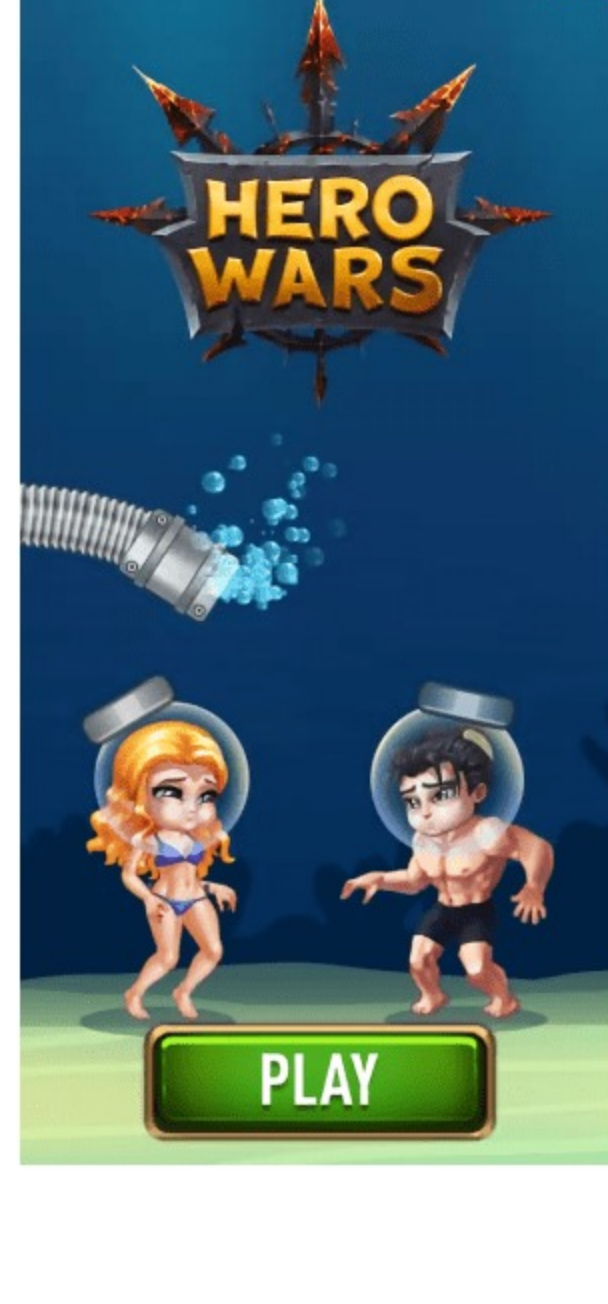
Hops were once a big crop in the area and Crothers said their family farm, on County G, still has a hop house. It was built about 1868, just at the end of the hop boom. It was two stories with stoves on the first floor to dry the hops. The stoves were sprinkled with sulphur to help dry the hops.

The society has a hop stove made in Delton, Groc said, and another audience member said she grows hops to make beer.

When hops were grown in the area, land planted to the crop was valued about \$1,000 an acre, Groc said.

New Haven Township had four schools before consolidation with the Wisconsin Dells School District: Ward, Badger Valley, Big Spring and Stafford.

Groc also told the story of Socrates Best, his wife Ellen and their three children. Socrates was a school teacher and had come to Big Spring from Ohio. He was a Protestant. In 1851, he married Ellen Lanston, an Irish Catholic. Groc said in those days Catholics and Protestants did not get along. Both families opposed the marriage, but the two wed anyway.



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They left Big Spring for Texas where Socrates again taught school. In 1861, Texas succeeded from the Union and Socrates was drafted into the Confederate Army. By this time, he and his wife had three children, two boys and baby girl.

Socrates was captured by the Union Army, which he then joined, and became a medic.

In the meantime, Ellen loaded the children and their possessions in a wagon and started north to Big Spring. It was difficult for her to get food, and going through Arkansas she was stopped by Union soldiers. The baby girl died and Ellen was also very sick. The soldiers took her to the hospital at Fort Smith, where Socrates happened to be stationed. As the soldiers carried Ellen into the hospital, Groc said, she was brought to her husband, but died.

Socrates was still in the Army and could not care for the two boys. He found a pinner claiming to be a minister who was traveling north on the Mississippi to Prairie du Chien. Socrates gave him money to care for the boys, but the so-called minister left the boys along the route. They somehow made it to Prairie du Chien where the people there found they lived near Portage and sent them onto Portage. In Portage, they ran into a Ramsey, Groc said. The Ramseys also lived in Big Spring, and he told them home to their Irish grandmother. "They were not greeted with open arms," by the grandmother, Groc said, but did say with her until the end of the war when Socrates came home.

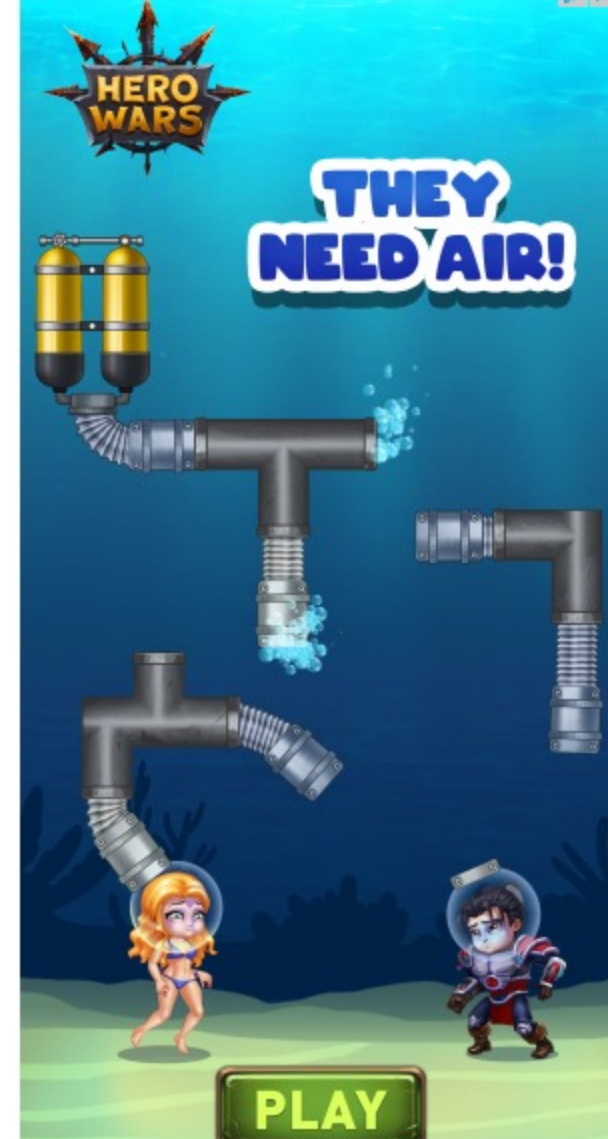
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After he came home he met Sara Ward, who had married a soldier, and who also had two children. Sara's husband died in the war. In 1866, Socrates married Sara Ward, and Groc said the two lived happily ever after.

The story of Socrates Best would make a great movie, Groc said.

comments



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