In March of 1962, twenty-two people gathered at the Whiting Hotel to organize the Berlin Historical Society. Mrs. Annette Secora was named president, Miss Nona O’Connor, secretary, and Larry Blackbourn, treasurer. Other charter members included Dorothy Arveson, director; Mrs. Grace Blackbourn, Miss Albertine Doro, Steve L. Gineris, Don Krebsbach, Russell Sumner, dir.; Jeanette Schalk, dir. Norbert Secora, Joyce Stemler, dir.; Mrs. Kay Swan, Jack Walters, Melvin & Lauretta Werch, Mrs. Ruth Westover, Mrs. Arisle Wiesender, Miss Margaret Williams, dir.; Harry & Esther Wolff, and Miss Annabel Wood, dir. The members voted to charter with the Wisconsin Historical Society that same night.

In 1963 the Berlin club was given the opportunity to acquire a one-room schoolhouse located in Waushara County. Built around 1866, the school was in continuous use until 1961. Members received permission from the city to located the school in Riverside Park. Over the years, former classmates of the school and other interested citizens have helped maintain the tiny museum. It is furnished with artifacts from this and other area schools.

Later the club got permission to set up a small artifact display on the third floor of City Hall but they quickly outgrew that space and began looking for a larger and more permanent museum space.

In 1984 they received title to the property formerly owned by Mel & Ellen Kroll at 111 S. Adams Ave. Companies, groups, individuals and the City came forward with donations and labor help to get the buildings ready. The first floor of the building was opened first, then the second floor. In 2001 former Mayor Marv Knecht donated the former blacksmith shop on Franklin St. to the club, expanding their campus even more.

Last year the club added a monument to the First Nations that used to live in our area. It is located in front of the Bottling Works building, next door to the main museum. This building’s displays were opened to the public two years ago.

Over the years the Society has held several events to raise money for their museums. They sponsored Victorian Days for a few years, held two Antique Appraisal Days and sold calendars with early Berlin pictures featured. Their most successful venture is the annual Ghost Walk held in October at Oakwood Cemetery in its 8th year. Each event follows a different theme. This year’s theme will commemorate the Civil War sesquicentennial.

The club will celebrate their special anniversary in June with a dinner and program. They will also have a display in the Berlin Chamber of Commerce window to also recognize Wisconsin Museum’s Week beginning May 18th.

BAHS continues to work to preserve Berlin’s history and make that history available.

Dates have been set for the 2012 summer season openings. A special kick-off with be held on Sunday, May 20th from 1 to 4 p.m.

The museums will then be open on May 29 and thereafter on the 2nd and 4th Sundays in June, July and August from 1 to 4 p.m.

Special arrangements can be made to view the museums at other times by calling Lee or Bobbie Erdmann at 920-361-2460.
Berlin Museum of Local History is sporting a new look these days. Several members have been working for the last few weeks getting new displays done and moving some others around to new locations.

On the first floor, the display cabinet holds a collection of ‘Berlin Indian’ memorabilia from the Berlin High School, the Historical Societies collections and from individual members. The picture gallery across the aisle sports a collection of pictures from the former Schissler Greenhouse, donated to the Society by Ollie Disotell. This former business operated in Berlin from the late 1890’s to about the 1970’s and was located on E. Moore St.

More changes occurred on the second floor where the Berlin Memorial Hospital exhibit was expanded. An 8 ft banner from the hospital’s 100th anniversary was donated to the display. The Yates Manufacturing storyboard was also moved to this area. The storyboard on the 1922 ice storm was moved around the corner and close to the 1956 tornado display.

The storyboard on Capt. David Evans was moved to the steamboat room.

The biggest change was the dismantling of the Gerald Heaney display, being replaced by a salute to some of Berlin’s mid-century manufacturers that are still in business today.

Wilson-Hurd was the first company to move to the first industrial park established in 1961. The company specializes in digital screen and litho printing on metal and plastics.

RAJ was born of the old Sand Knit Co. and Ripon Jacket. Sand Knit moved to Berlin in 1952. It’s building was severely damaged in the 1956 tornado and it went through several ownership changes, becoming Medalist-Sand Knit and MacGregor Sports. Ripon Athlete, headed by Hank Derleth moved into the building on Junction St. in 1992 and has continued to expand and grow. They use the ‘Sand Knit’ logo on some of their merchandise.

RAJ specializes in athletic uniforms, award jackets and warm up pants and jackets. The company has contracts with the NFL, NBA and a number of college and high school teams.

Grede Co. is the latest corporation to take over the foundry started in Berlin about 1912 after the Schaeffer plant established in 1908 was bought by Frank Chapman. It was then known as the Berlin Chapman Co. In 1963 it became part of Perflex Corp. A merger with McQuay Corp. in 1971 saw another name change. After a short ownership by Snyder Corp, it became locally owned in 1986 by several Berlin businessmen and known as Berlin Foundry. Citation Corp of Alabama acquired the company in 1995 and just a few years ago Grede Co. of Milwaukee took over the reins of this 100 year old company. It has remained the area’s largest manufacturing employer. Multi-generations of Berlinites have worked here.

2012 Regional Meetings

The 2012 Regional meetings for the Wisconsin Council for Local History and the Wisconsin Historical Society have been set.

East Central district meeting will be held June 27th at Beaver Dam, hosted by the Dodge County Historical Society. Berlin is in East Central district but WCLH members can attend the meetings at any site.


The Wisconsin Historical Society’s annual Conference will be held in Madison this year, Sept. 28th & 29th.

Mrs. Gerharz 4th grade taking notes during their walking tour.

Mrs. Gail Gerharz 4th grade class visited the Berlin Museum and took a walking tour of the Nathan Strong district on April 26th. Dan Freimark and Lee Erdmann provided the guided tour at the museum and Bobbie Erdmann did the walking tour. This is the 3rd years the 4th grade has done this special project.

Clay Lambert 1st graders visited Clark School in March and the 3rd graders are planning their trip sometime in May. Tours for any group can be arranged by calling 361-2460.
Dudley Swinehart taken in 1919

While Indiana Jones was a figment of the imagination of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg, we just learned a young man destined to become a real life soldier-of-fortune lived in Berlin and graduated from Berlin High School in 1911.

Dudley E. Swinehart came to Berlin with his family in 1909 from Colorado. His mother, Mrs. Dakota Swinehart, was a daughter of Dr. J.L. and Addy Walbridge. Dr. Walbridge, one of the driving forces in the establishment of the Yates Memorial Hospital in 1911 and 1912, had a thriving practice here. Dudley graduated from Berlin High School, then went to the military Clemson college in South Carolina to study civil engineering. Two of his older brothers were civil engineers and worked on the Panama Canal. One brother, Charles, was killed in a blast at the site and is buried in Oakwood Cemetery in the Walbridge family plot. The family had lived in Las Cascades, Panama for a brief time.

After graduation from Clemson, Dudley went to Morococha, Peru where he was in charge of a railroad project. About this time is when his “soldier of fortune” activities began. His history shows that he spent some time in Nicaragua where he became involved in a revolution there and was termed a “military advisor.” The timing of this adventure is a little sketchy because some news articles about him infer that he worked in Panama and Nicaragua during his college years.

He returned to the United States and Berlin when war was imminent and enlisted in the army. He and his cousin, John S. Walbridge Jr. are listed in the book Honor Roll of Green Lake and Waushara Counties, 1917-1918-1919 published by the Berlin Journal Compan.

In 1919-20 along with their pictures and a short bio.

In 1921 it was reported that he and a friend, Hoyt Shaw from Steamboat Springs, Col. (where Dudley had attended grade school) left for Shanghai China to work on a big railroad construction contract. It was this move that put Dudley right in the middle of a major struggle for power in China.

Dudley became acquainted with Chang Hsueh-Liang, son of Chang Tso-Lin, a Manchurian war lord. Chang Sr. was becoming a dominant power in all of the country north of the Yangtze River. Swinehart rapidly advanced in Chang’s movement and as a military advisor soon became one of the generals in Chang’s army.

News articles of the time reported that Dudley was sent on several diplomatic missions to Japan and the United States for the Manchurian dictator during his time with him. He was sent to Washington D.C. in February 1927 on a “deeply confidential mission by the North China dictator. The errand concerned charges of Bolshevik activity in South China. While in the U.S. Gen. Swinehart took time to visit with his mother, brothers, sisters, other relatives and friends.

He gave several interviews in the various communities he visited. In one he stated “Chang Tso-Lin is a wonderful man, a remarkable military personage,” and said Chang had the power to rule China as long as he desired. He stated that while reports of conditions in China had not been exaggerated in this country, the Manchurian war lord would be able to keep Eugene Chen, the red commander of the Nationalist army, the Cantonese, from advancing beyond the Yangtze river. He declared that Chang, who had been governor of Manchuria for 16 years, “was giving the people of Northern China the best government they have ever had.”

Another interview reported that Mr. D.E. Swinehart, recently appointed High Military Advisor to Chang Tso-Lin, felt that chances for unification of North China were the best they had been in years. “Chang’s military strength as a stabilizing influence is brighter than it has been for some time. He will make no peace with the Red forces,” stated the military adviser.

Then on June 4th 1928 the train in which Chang Tso-Lin was riding was blown up by a bomb planted by Japanese conspirators. Twenty-one days later, news was received by his family that Dudley had drowned in the bay of Kamakura, Japan supposedly while Swimming. He was 34 years old. His family was in shock and to the person did not believe the story they were given. A brother and cousin both stated in interviews that they felt Dudley was slain because he knew too much and had influence on the son and heir of Chang Tso-Lin.

“Strength was lent to the supposition that General Swinehart met with foul play by the fact that he was an exceptionally strong swimmer and a powerful athlete. While attending Berlin High School, he was a star on the football team,” according to an article in the Berlin Evening Journal of July 3, 1928.

Dudley was buried at Yokohama but his family requested he be disinterred, cremated and his ashes sent to the U.S. for burial. Original plans were for his ashes to be buried at Oakwood cemetery in Berlin in a plot owned by his grandfather. However further research found that the family decided to bury him in San Diego instead, where his mother and sisters were living.

The Berlin Evening Journal of June 28th ended their news article of his death: “Tall and of powerful physique, with a rugged American face, and a mop of curly brown hair, General Swinehart was the typical soldier of fortune, gloried in fiction by Richard Harding Davis.”

It begs the imagination to think about what would have happened in that part of the world if Chang Tso-Lin AND Dudley Swinehart had not been killed. What would our world look like today if China had not become communist?

A little more than a month after the two deaths, Chang Hsueh-Liang, the son of the late Manchurian dictator, signed an agreement with Gen. Chaing Kai-Shek to align with the Nationalist government against the advise of the Japanese and Italian governments. He spent the next 50 years in house arrest until the death of Chang Kai-Shek.

Born in Kansas, residing for a time in Colorado and Wisconsin, Dudley Swinehart lived a life of picturesque adventure. His chosen career was that of a civil engineer, and the fact that this profession took him to faraway places easily enabled a man of his bold, danger-loving nature to slip naturally into the role of soldier of fortune. Civil engineer, military veteran, military adviser, revolutionist, General in a Chinese army, a man for the history books, once called Berlin home.

Some of this information was shared with us by a member of the Swinehart family.
The Berlin Area Historical Society is a fully recognized non-profit Educational Institute affiliated with the Wisconsin Historical Society. The Mission of the Society is to preserve and interpret the history of the Berlin Area.

Currently the Society owns and operates four museum buildings. The Museum of Local History, located at 111 S. Adams Ave includes a two-story brick house, the former Kroll Bottling Works and the former Huser Blacksmith Shop. This museum complex is open on the second and fourth Sundays from Memorial Day to Labor Day from 1-4 p.m. and always by appointment.

The one-room school house, Clark School is located at the entrance to Riverside Park on Water St. and is open by appointment.

Call 920-361-2460 for information on these museums or to make an appointment.

The Berlin Area Historical Society is maintained by DONATIONS and membership. All persons interested in history are encouraged to join.

Meetings are held on the 2nd Wednesday during the months of Jan. through May and Sept. through Dec. at 7 p.m. at the American Legion hall, 140 S. Adams St. Guests are always welcome.