

Embracing The Legacy Of The Blues / From the South To The North

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Part 2. Grafton, WI and Paramount Records

History, dreams, meaningful coincidences, timing, synchronicity, networking, and the blues, can come together to transform a community.

Grafton, Wisconsin is a town of 11,000 inhabitants approximately 25 north of Milwaukee on US 43. In recent years, the town has struggled with its identity in the shadow of nearby communities that had achieved status, economic growth, and recognition as tourist destinations as a result of capitalizing on their local history. Port Washington, a few miles to the northeast, has a long, colorful history as a Great Lakes port and has a restored downtown nestled against a lovely harbor. Cedarburg, just a few miles to the southeast, draws throngs of weekend tourists who walk the main street spending their dollars in shops, restaurants, and galleries that are housed in carefully maintained 19th Century Americana buildings. Grafton has long been considered an anonymous working class town that you have to drive through in order to get to and from Port Washington and Cedarburg. How could Grafton, with seemingly little local history to promote beyond the legacy of the lime kilns in Grafton's Lime Kiln Park, find its identity, capitalize on it, and step out into the sunlight with its own sense of civic pride?

Angela Mack is a musician/music teacher who moved with her family to Grafton from Madison, WI in 1996. She has a passion for African American culture, music history, and a desire to bring arts to her new home community. A few years ago, she received a letter from a record collector. The letter had been sent to many Grafton residents. It was from a record collector who was in the area looking for old Paramount 78 rpm records. This was the first time she had heard about the Paramount Records that were produced and recorded in Grafton. She didn't believe it, thought it was a chain letter, and threw it away. Later, she was researching Grafton history on the Internet, and sure enough, it was true. There had been a very important and influential record production plant, Paramount Records, in Grafton.

Angela became obsessed with knowing more about the history and importance of Paramount. The more she learned, the more confused she got. "Why wasn't this a big deal in Grafton?" She became intrigued with finding out the history of Paramount Records.

Angela found that Grafton was more than just a footnote in America's musical history. In the early 20th Century The Wisconsin Chair Company in nearby Port Washington manufactured furniture. The manufacturing of wooden furniture led the company into the production of wood cabinets for record players. The production of the record cabinets led them to produce Paramount Records in cooperation with New York Recording Laboratories (NYRL). Under the Paramount label, they released a continuous flow of jazz, gospel, and outstanding blues recordings. The blues recordings were marketed under the Paramount 12000/13000 "race" series. Between 1929 and 1932, NYRL operated a recording studio in Grafton. The host of seminal blues artists whose music was released on the Paramount label includes Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Blind Blake, Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, Willie Brown, Louise Johnson, King Solomon Hill, The Mississippi Sheiks, Tommy Johnson, Henry Townsend, and many others. Paramount released twenty-five percent of the blues recordings that were marketed during this era, and dominated the blues marketplace. Due to the stock market crash and failing economy during the Great Depression, Paramount began to decline. They ceased recording studio activities in mid 1932, although they were able to ship records until late 1933. Paramount then went out of business.

Now Angela understood why she had received a mass-mailed letter from a record collector seeking old Paramount 78s. Vintage blues enthusiasts and collectors get very excited at the prospect of acquiring old Paramount recordings. Those old 78s are the most sought after of blues recordings. They can be sold at auction for large sums of money. Finding a previously thought to be 'lost' Paramount record is a milestone in the life of a record collector, as well as a milestone in the documentation of American music history. In the words of Paramount Records historian, Alex van der Tuuk, "The importance of the record company and its studio cannot be underestimated. Charley Patton is considered King of the Delta Blues, partially based on his recorded output recorded in Grafton."

The flames of Angela's passion for African American culture, music, and history were fanned and the Grafton link to Paramount was just the catalyst that was needed to put her interests into action. She spent time at the old Paramount factory location watching the Milwaukee River tumble over the rocks, musing over the last few brick remains of the foundation of the building, and re-read the small roadside sign that marked the historic site. Later, the idea that there should be a blues festival in Grafton at Lime Kiln Park to honor the legacy of Grafton and the blues came to her in a dream.

She took her idea for a blues festival to the Village officials. Village President, Jim Brunquell, says, "It took several more communications from Angela before I truly realized what a historical treasure the Village possessed." He was now intrigued by the idea. Grafton was in the middle of a major downtown redevelopment effort. In addition, they were looking at marketing tools to attract and retain business. One quality that was needed was an identity, a hook, or concept that they could build their presence

around. The 'lost' legacy of Paramount Records just might be the keystone that was needed to achieve all of these municipal goals. Brunnquell pursued the concept with Village officials, and he pointed Angela to the Grafton Jaycees for the possible production of a blues festival.

In early 2005, she got in touch with Alex van der Tuuk, author of "Paramount's Rise and Fall, A History of the Wisconsin Chair Company and its Recording Activities." Via very long distance, (van der Tuuk lives in the Netherlands), he offered Angela input, information, and moral support. Alex suggested that Angela's husband, Patrick, start a Paramount web site to gain support from others and to begin networking. They got the web site up and running, and Alex and Angela doggedly started doing outreach to everyone they knew.

At this point, Angela posted a message online at The Blindman's Blues Forum seeking advice, guidance, and support for her efforts to raise the Paramount/blues consciousness in Grafton. This writer saw her post on that forum, took a great deal of interest in her cause, and responded. I began advising and mentoring her toward her goals. Little did I know at that time how involved I would be in the Grafton/Paramount process, and how far all of these projects would progress in less than a year.

Meanwhile, local chef/restaurateur, Joe Krupski, was planning for a restaurant somewhere in the downtown area of Grafton. He was aware that there was a market need for dining in that area. His eyes kept turning towards a building sitting on the corner of Wisconsin Avenue/12th Street and Bridge Street--right in the heart of downtown Grafton. The building at 1304 - 12th Avenue had been vacant for quite some time, so he figured the owner would be very open to any idea that might work. He began constructing a business plan around this building in November 2004. He learned from the owner that the building was the first county courthouse and that it was nearly 160 years old--the oldest commercial building still standing in Grafton. He became interested in learning more about the building so that he could incorporate that into his business plan. He visited the public library in Grafton to do research. While looking through the Grafton archives, he noticed a few statements about a record company that existed in Grafton. He had an idea of incorporating some of Grafton's musical history into the restaurant to make it a more interesting place to visit. (A Hard Rock style café concept with a Paramount Records theme.) He was learning more and more about Paramount/NYRL and had started collecting 78s and other memorabilia to incorporate into the restaurant. He read Alex van der Tuuk's book on the history of Paramount. Krupski got excited about bringing Grafton's heritage back in a venue that could also help educate the local population about an important part of their hometown history. His restaurant would definitely have a Paramount theme and to get the Village onboard, he needed to educate them on this wonderful history that was being ignored. He purchased more copies of van der Tuuk's book and gave them to the Village President and Planner along with a CD set of all of the blues music recorded in Grafton

by Paramount, as well as a full copy of his business plan. Since he was searching for capital to fund the restaurant, he also gave out copies of the book to local bankers. He approached the Grafton Chamber of Commerce where he was told that another person, Angela Mack, was e-mailing the Village asking them why they hadn't done anything with their musical heritage and was insisting that they do something about it. He was given Angela's phone number and e-mail address, but he did not contact her immediately due to so many other concerns regarding his business plan.

Finally, Krupski locked in an offer with the owner of the building and found funding to begin construction of the Paramount Restaurant. It was during the period of time that he officially approached the Village about doing the project was when he first met Angela Mack and her husband, Patrick. As they talked about the Paramount Records history, they knew the Village was starting to also have their share of thoughts on the Paramount concept since the Village officials had always fielded complaints that "Grafton doesn't have a theme like Cedarburg or Port Washington."

While Krupski was pushing forward with his Paramount-themed restaurant concept, Angela connected the Grafton Area Live Arts (GALA) to bring an "Embrace the Legacy" concert series to the GALA concert hall venue. The concert series would focus on performers who could educate on Paramount history and perform songs recorded by Paramount artists. She approached Scott Oftedahl, former Grafton High School band director and current principal of Kennedy Elementary School, about bringing a blues educator to Grafton to raise the awareness of school children regarding the history of blues music and Grafton's blues legacy. Oftedahl was more than receptive to the idea. While Angela made arrangements with GALA for the first "Embracing The Legacy" concert, Oftedahl organized plans for a combined blues education presentation/concert for all of Grafton's elementary school children. Over 500 elementary students would be bussed to the high school auditorium for the one-hour morning blues presentation/concert on Sept. 30th, 2005. In the afternoon, the 4th grade students at Oftedahl's Kennedy Elementary School would have a private one-hour session with the blues educator. The concert at the GALA venue would be that same evening. A Paramount history discussion panel was scheduled for Oct. 30th at the Cedarburg Arts Council. Participants in the panel discussion would include Paramount historian, van der Tuuk, and other knowledgeable Paramount Records devotees.

I was pleasantly surprised and most grateful when Angela Mack and school Principal, Scott Oftedahl, requested that I participate in their plans by being the blues educational presenter, as well as the performer for the first GALA "Embracing The Legacy" concert. I eagerly anticipated my visit to Grafton, the school presentation, the concert, and to visiting the Paramount historic site.

Steve Ostermann of the local Ozaukee Press staff did a superb job of publicizing all of the Paramount 'resurrection' efforts, including covering my visit to Grafton. "Michael

"Hawkeye" Herman had Grafton school kids bouncing in their seats. In between the boogie beat, he also taught them a few things about the blues – the profound influence it has had on music they listen to every day and the vehicle it offers for expressing their emotions. Herman's hour-long program drew praise from students, parents and educators alike. Scott Oftedahl, Kennedy Elementary School principal, said Herman's appearance introduced students to historically important American music and showed them how relevant it remains today. We're very fortunate to have him come here."

The evening GALA concert was a sell out. The audience was superb. During the concert I explained to the crowd, "Grafton and Paramount Records are responsible for much of the American blues music that came out of the 1920s and 1930s. You have a great opportunity here to show people what this history is and why it's so important. It's not only important for students to learn about, it's important for the community to realize what they have. You have a sleeping giant, and it's finally starting to wake up." An enthusiastic full house of local residents showed up at the Cedarburg Cultural Center the following day for the afternoon Paramount panel discussion.

At about this time, local Jaycees members, Kris Marshall, Ellen Zacharias, and Peter Raymond were instrumental in founding a blues society. The group used the "Let's Get Started/How To Create A Blues Society," article that appeared in the 2005 issue of the Blues Festival Guide as an aid in founding the Grafton Blues Association. They immediately undertook responsibility for producing the first annual Paramount Blues Festival in cooperation with the Grafton Area Jaycees. The festival will be held on Sept. 23rd, 2006 at Lime Kiln Park, in Grafton. Marshall and her committee have pulled out all the stops in planning the all day event. The festival will feature nationally recognized blues artists and local bands, including: Albert Cummings, Nora Jean Brusco, Hawkeye Herman, David Evans and Joe Filisko, Reverend Raven and the Chain Smoking Altar Boys, and The Steve Cohen Blues Band with Greg Koch. Educational workshops will be presented by well known blues historian/author Gayle Dean Wardlow, and fellow historian/musicians, David Evans and Joe Filisko. Alex van der Tuuk will be on hand to sign copies of his book and discuss the history of Paramount Records.

Angela and Patrick Mack, Jim Brunquell, Joe Krupski, Melissa Schmitz, and others, founded GIG (Grooves In Grafton), to further support and retain the history of all of the genres of music that Paramount recorded in Grafton. GIGS will present exhibits, park history displays, and educational programs "to educate, increase the awareness of, and preserve the music recorded and pressed in Grafton, Wisconsin by the New York Recording Laboratories."

Grafton city officials, including Village President Brunquell, had been planning to spur development in the center of downtown by providing tax-incentive financing packages to businesses locating in the downtown area. They already had their eyes on plans for

the construction of a downtown plaza which would help bring people back to the area. With the newfound interest in Paramount and the possibility of the Paramount-themed restaurant going in, city officials embraced the Paramount concept for the downtown Paramount Plaza. Paramount Plaza will include a saxophone-shaped fountain spewing water from the horn, and sidewalk decor inlaid to resemble piano keys that will create a Paramount Recording Artists' Walk Of Fame, featuring the names of artists who recorded in Grafton and the approximate recording date.

Joe Krupski is in the midst of refurbishing the old courthouse building, near the future Paramount Plaza, into The Paramount Restaurant. The building was the Bienlein Hotel in the 1920s where Paramount's artists may have stayed the night while recording in Grafton. Krupski hopes to have the restaurant up and running before the Sept. 23rd date of the Paramount Blues Festival.

Beginning March 1, 2006, the Ozaukee Bank in Grafton, a major sponsor for the Paramount Blues Festival, will host monthly exhibits presented by Grooves In Grafton (GIG) to enhance visibility for the festival and inform the community about their Paramount Records heritage.

The fire of interest in local history and Paramount Records is now lit and beginning to grow. People are excited that Grafton is, at long last, getting an identity and has something to be proud of. Local folks are coming forward begging to get involved. They are excited about the opportunity to participate in something bigger than themselves that educates, entertains, and brings a sense of identity and pride to the community.

The efforts of numerous individuals interested in educating the town about their unique contribution to America's musical history opened the eyes of many others who immediately recognized the potential to build a theme for Grafton around this important legacy. Within the next year, the face of Grafton will dramatically change. Paramount's long kept secret legacy will finally have its chance to shine. Coming out of anonymity, the town of Grafton is embracing this legacy and is now passionate about Paramount.

In the March 2 edition of the Ozaukee Press, Steve Ostermann reported, "When blues musician and educator, Michael "Hawkeye" Herman, came to Grafton last fall to perform at schools and in concert, he spoke to local residents about their community as "a sleeping giant." 'Grafton,' Herman told his audiences, 'has chance to acknowledge its place in American music history and let the rest of the world know about a rich legacy that has long been overlooked by the general public.' Herman's words--which echoed the sentiments of area educators who invited him to appear locally--have not fallen on deaf ears. Since his visit last September, a growing number of residents have embraced missions publicizing Grafton's musical heritage. The result of their efforts is

the formation of groups that are organizing a blues festival, park history displays, educational programs, and a variety of other activities they hope will teach, enlighten, and entertain. The collective goal, volunteers said, is to pay tribute to the Paramount blues artists and other musicians who recorded for the former Wisconsin Chair Co.'s music division."

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For information on Grafton's Paramount Blues Festival:

<http://www.graftonblues.org>

For information on Paramount Records history:

<http://www.paramountshome.org>



**Paramount Records factory in Grafton, WI.
courtesy Michael "Hawkeye" Herman collection**



Contemporary view of the Paramount Records factory site on the Milwaukee River in Grafton, WI.
photo by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman ©2005



Ida Cox, Worried In Mind Blues record on Paramount.
photo by Michael "Hawkeye" Herman ©2005