

LOCAL NEWS

—History at a Glance—

DeMun's trading house was on bluff overlooking Sugar River

BY HARRIET HALLORAN

Translated from the French: "Soon I shall move. I am having built a house on a pretty little river, just 12 miles from here. I am here 20 miles away from any house", wrote French fur trader Julius DeMun on October 16, 1831, from Skinner's Old Place, Michigan Territory, to his family in St. Louis, Missouri.

The "pretty little river" was designated on the initial U.S. Government survey map as Sugar Creek (later labeled River). The 16 foot by 20 foot log house was built by November on a bluff overlooking Sugar Creek and it was occupied by DeMun and his cook, Mr. Gallois. The house had an outside door, dirt floor, no windows, and on the west wall a wattle (wood and mud) fireplace which warmed for about six feet.

The place became known as DeMun's Trading House. It was stocked with merchandise bartered from Choutou's large trading post at St. Louis. Furs were purchased from the local Winnebago Indians. Less than a mile down Sugar Creek on the opposite side, Chief White Breast had a village consisting of long houses covered with thatched mats woven by Indian women.

The spring of 1832 brought rumors of Chief Black Hawk and his followers crossing the Mississippi River to their old

gardens in Illinois from the land they had been allotted in Iowa. The few white settlers in northern Illinois and Michigan Territory (later Wisconsin) became frightened. They built forts for protection and abandoned their houses while the Black Hawk War raged. DeMun hastily closed the trading post, leaving goods behind. He went to Fort Hamilton (Wiot) and on to Galena, apparently never returning. Eventually the log house was destroyed, perhaps by a prairie fire in 1847, but there was no proof of its existence.

It took Colorado native Tom Fey's move to Wisconsin more than 150 years later to learn about this local history. He became interested enough to start searching. The old survey map at the Green County Court House indicated that DeMun's house was the only residence in the entire area. Fey questioned exactly where the cabin had been and what had become of it. His search led to an organized archeological excavation near the Sugar River in 1986-87 which recovered fire-ravaged artifacts similar to trading pieces currently on display in a St. Louis museum. The items recovered at DeMun's are part of a Wisconsin sesquicentennial exhibit in the Brodhead Historical Society Depot Museum this summer.

Research on Julius DeMun led to information that he was

born in 1782 at Port au Prince, San Domingo (later Haiti), into a French noble family dating back 19 generations. He and his brother were sent to France for education where they were caught up in the French Revolution. They witnessed Robespierre's beheading, escaped into hiding, and were spirited into England disguised as street urchins to rejoin their parents. After his father's death, mother and children returned to the New World on one of the 12 sea voyages she experienced in her lifetime. Julius' brother was lost to death by a duel. The family arrived in St. Louis where Julius married the beautiful 15-year-old Louise Isabella Gratlot whose family is prominent in the Midwest and Great Lakes history. His later years included a trial for his life in a Spanish court at Santa Fe during a fur trading expedition. He managed a coffee plantation in Cuba before operating the trading house. Finally returning to St. Louis, he worked as a government employee.

When the Bourbons were restored to the throne, Julius DeMun and family received royal letters of invitation dated September 26, 1817, by Louis XVIII to return to France. The letters were accompanied by the Fleur de Lis decoration, the highest honor for a king's gift. But DeMun lived quietly in St. Louis until he died on August 15, 1843.

