

The Iola Historical Society's WINDOW



QUARTERLY MEMBER AND ACTIVITIES NEWSLETTER

VOL. 19, NO. 3 | SUMMER 2026

CENTRAL COUNTY AIRPORT

Providing Service to Iola Area for 80 Years

A Reflection Back on Some of the Highlights and Sidelights

By Jim Neidert



In March, 1946, a group of men met to initiate planning towards the development for what became the Central County Airport. That initial assembly consisted of William Wilker, Sherman Cleaves, Allard Mortenson, and Phil Neidert from Iola, along with Ted Webb from Ogdensburg. They quickly agreed to seek establishing the airfield's location at the intersection of State Highway 161 and County Trunk E, which my dad told me he discovered, though I am unaware of any documentation of that fact.

— Continued on Page 2

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This past week or so I've been involved with a couple projects that have drawn my mind to become focused on the subject of transportation and how it has changed Iola's and our greater world over the years. The first involved the preparation of the feature for this issue of the *Window*. The second involves preliminary work on creating a planned 2027 *Historic Iola* marker embracing the era of Iola's 19th century development.

The community that became Iola traces its beginnings back to the 1853 arrival of the first settlers, whose transportation mode was horse drawn buggies and wagons. In 1893/94 the "Iron Horse" arrived and connected the growing Iola community – resident population boomed from 194 in 1880 to 558 in 1900 – to the world. The Wright brothers pioneering development of controlled heavier than air flight on December 17, 1903, which led to the first scheduled commercial flight on January 1, 1914, foretold the eventuality of the

Central County Airport development. Overlapping these eras was the onset of the automobile, the ubiquitousness of which by May 30, 1958, became the death knell for the Iola & Northern Railroad. Within five months, on October 26, 1958, the first flight of the Boeing 707 brought jet transportation to the masses. Then, on July 20, 1969, in an out of this world experience, the Apollo 11 mission climaxed with Neil Armstrong setting foot on the moon. The 21st century has subsequently witnessed the early development of satellite navigation and driverless vehicles.

We probably can't realistically imagine what transportation will look like in 2053 . . . barely a quarter century down the road . . . when Iola will be celebrating its *Bicentennial* . . . with the Iola Historical Society will be marking its *Centennial* . . . while the interregnum will have become recorded history!

AIRPORT – Continued from Page 1

With the establishment of a working body, within days, in April, 1946, the initiation of an organized airport operation was established under the working name Central County Airport, as opposed to the assigned location identifier 68C. The governing boards of Iola, Manawa and Ogdensburg, along with those of the townships of Iola, St. Lawrence and Helvetia, were approached for sponsorship of the project, with all voting unanimously in favor of moving forward.

That same month, the Waupaca County Board voted to approve the appropriation of \$3,000, in support of the other governing bodies, to support the required land acquisition and construction expenses. The 130 acres of land was purchased for \$2,200. With the expenses for leveling and grading the runways, along with grass seeding and fertilizer

and related outlays, total expenditures came to \$3,400, by the time the airport was ready for business.

The airport directors did not feel the then working name for the airport – Central County Airport – was an appealing identity. In May they reached out to the public for "better" naming suggestions, offering the prize of a free plane ride the day the field was inaugurated. After the contest deadline arrived on June 5, they decided to proceed with the Central County Airport identity. It would have been interesting to have seen the list of suggestions that had been advanced.

That fall, on October 17, 1946, Lee Nelson, "Iola's Humble Hero" who piloted 35 World War II B-17 bombing missions over Europe, landed a Stearman biplane on the freshly planted

— Continued on Page 3

AIRPORT – Continued from Page 2

runway turf. This caused quite a commotion, as the board had expressed its opinion that this aircraft was “too heavy” to be landing there until the turf was in better condition.

Johnny Moriarity had recently moved to this area from Milwaukee, establishing Moriarty Flying Service and becoming the flight instructor at the Waupaca Airport, subsequently renamed Brunner Field, after former Waupaca Foundry CEO Don Brunner. Then, in May, 1947, Johnny began performing flight instruction classes at 68C – Central County Airport – one day a week on Thursdays.



The vintage flight office at Central County Airport, a survivor of the late 1940's development of the field, built by the erstwhile Johnny Moriarty, who began conducting flight instruction classes there in 1947.

In November, 1948, the flying Legionnaires were formed – names not available – who built a hanger for their airplane. By now, there were a total of five hangers located at the field.

The first Central County Airport “jamboree” was held in July, 1949, an event the *Iola Herald* called a “mini” airshow, quite mild compared to the airshows of today. It drew quite a crowd, as aviation was a pretty big attraction in those early days.

I was four years old at the time, but I do remember dad taking me to it. It is one of those memories of childhood, like the first time I rode my new bike when I was five. My dad had built his hanger in September, 1949. That is confirmed by the presence of my handprints and the date in the concrete doorstep. Airshows continued at the airport year after year, with the *Herald* reporting thousands were in attendance. That figure seems perhaps a little excessive.

That same year, dad gave me my first plane ride, instilling me with the flying “bug!” While I didn’t start flying lessons until I was twenty, thanks to aviation, I have subsequently met some of the finest people and become friends with many aviators, most of whom I probably would have never known otherwise.

Johnny Moriarty ended up building the Wings Inn tavern just north of the airport, opening it that September as well. That had been his plan all along, from when he had begun conducting flight training at 68C.

Johnny had built a small flight office on the airport property and became the airport manager in 1949. He provided flight instructions by day and tended bar by night. He’d taught numerous locals how to fly and had several active students at the time of his death in 1960. Johnny was killed in a car accident near Antigo. I remember going into his former flight office around 1970, at which time all the student flight “logbooks” he was working with at the time of his death were still laying atop the desk. Formal flight instruction was discontinued at 68C following Moriarty’s death, although some informal training was subsequently conducted by Dave Lindsay from Manawa, who possessed an instructors rating.

I recall recognizing most of the names entered in those logs, and have long regretted not having taken possession of them, but at the time I felt they belonged there. Unfortunately, the logs subsequently disappeared and are now gone forever. Early flight instruction was \$5.00 an hour “dual,” \$3.00 for the airplane (an Aeronca Champ) and \$2.00 for the instructor. Back then, the cost to acquire a “private pilot license” was in the range of \$150.00 to \$200.00. That’s to the point where you could take passengers aloft with you.

Today, that same license will cost a student \$8,000 to \$10,000, with some flight schools charging as high as \$20,000! In May of 1946, Allard Mortenson met with a flight “examiner” at the Waupaca Airport, obtaining his private pilot’s license after a short 35-minute “check ride.” That same day, Lawrence Kriewaldt and James Jacobson both “soloed,” leaving the instructor behind on the ground. An article in the paper related that those two fledglings had attained their first goal, having become solo pilots. The first solo marks a student discovering they CAN FLY, their confidence level growing, a very important step for any student.

Our village doctor, Dr. Wilker, had also soloed somewhere around that time. The article indicated he soloed after three-hours and 30-minutes of training. That wasn’t much flying time before taking to the sky alone, but in those early years of aviation, things were a little different. Today you can figure on investing around eight hours before the instructor jumps out and tells his student to complete three takeoff and landings before parking the airplane. That’s when you exit the runway to

— Continued on Page 7



CLUBHOUSE HANGER

at the
Central Co. Airport



The Central County Airport “Clubhouse Hanger” is dedicated to the late Don Brunner, who motivated that it be built with the look of a “farm country” structure. A representation of Snoopy dominates the wind-T, his paws at the control and neck scarf tailing in the wind, providing pilots with directional support for which of the three runways to use when arriving and departing.

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An early traffic occasion at Central County Airport was captured in this shot of Iola American Legion Sheveland-Taylor Post 14 members Ray Berutha and Milton Aasen (on left), are believed to having been receiving the renewal of the Post's charter from Department Commander Walter Rose and an associate (on right) who had flown in 1947, backdropped by a single-engine Aeronca Champ bearing the N85775 registration number, an aircraft owned at that time by Johnny Moriarty. Given the uncertain identities and specifics of this photo, we would welcome any feedback that might be forthcoming from members or other readers of this presentation.

AIRPORT – Continued from Page 3

come to a complete stop, taxiing to the beginning of the runway and taking off again, rather than doing a “touch ‘n go.” Touch-‘n-Goes come later, after more experience has been gained.

It was also in May, 1946, that my dad and his CFI (certified flight instructor) flew from the downtown Wausau Airport, where he had obtained his private pilot license in 1941, to Alliance, Ohio, where he bought a brand new Taylorcraft right from the factory. I believe dad said he paid \$1,650 for that plane.

By August, 1946, 68C – Central County Airport – was really growing. Dr. Wilker and Allard Mortenson had jointly purchased a new Aeronca Chief. It was provided a home in a hanger they had built at the airport. Sometime after Johnny's death, Big Falls DX oilman Russel “Red” Arndt, married Johnny's widow, Bernie. Red was also a pilot that based his plane in a hanger on the field. Unofficially, Red became airport manager for twenty years or so.

Then, about 1980, Duane “Abe” Abrahamson of Manawa was elected president of the 68C club. He did a good job overseeing the operations at our little grass strip. Shortly after Abe became president, he and I started putting the “Car Show” breakfast together, they becoming great successes as events and financially. The club serves several hundred breakfasts each year on Car Show weekend.

Back then, in the early 1980's, we had over thirty active members. You could stop in pretty much anytime and find someone around. On evenings, you could invariably find one or two planes taking to the air.

Fast forward . . . to 1999.

Although the Waupaca Airport, today, is named after the late Don Brunner, Don's heart was with 68C. He expressed the desire to see that the club would have a nice hanger as an operating

— Continued on Page 8

center. One day, Don while having lunch with one of our members, Ron Unertl, the two of them laid out on a napkin a rough plan for the club hanger. Don indicated to Ron that he would like the hanger to have the look of a “farm country” structure.

Don then gave us the “seed” money to get the project started. Chet Krause subsequently “fertilized” the seed with a generous donation as well, in deference to our budding connection to the Iola Old Car Show. As previously mentioned, we were serving breakfast from another hanger, before the new one was erected. We already had pilots flying in from all over, even out-of-state, for our fabulous breakfast, providing shuttle service for those who wished to spend some time at the car show as well.



*Feature author Jim Neidert grilling pancakes
for a Central County breakfast during an
Iola Old Car Show.*

OK . . . back to the development of the new club hanger.

Ron took the bull by the horns in pursuit of achieving the project. If Ron hadn't jumped in, I don't know that Don's dream would have ever come true. At the time a few club members were against the idea of building a club hanger. Subsequently most 68C members pitched in with donations of time or money.

Pete Blenker, owner of Blenker Construction in Amherst, invited Ron to meet with one of his designers to draft a set of building plans. Once the design was finalized, Pete brought a

building crew over and they had the hanger – as the clubhouse it never housed an airplane – framed up in a day and a half. Ron was also an important “player” in the construction phase, his major contributions included applying the siding, installing the windows and door frames, and fabrication of the fireplace stonework, while he and his wife did all of the staining.

Other major contributors included: Wayne Poppy, a licensed plumber from Royalton who installed the plumbing, including the septic system; Paul Roloff from Waupaca, who did the concrete work at cost and donated the stones for the fireplace; Ivar Dalland, who did the electrical work, contributing his time and materials; Paul Jason, who fabricated the kitchen cabinetry.

It all came together rather quickly and efficiently. The hanger was completed in 2000 . . . **FOR THE LOVE OF FLYING.**

Although Ron and Butch, another club member, had started cooking the old standard Wisconsin burgers and brats for club members from Ron's hanger years before the new hanger was built, nothing compared to the service that could be provided from the new structure. It provides inside seating for around a hundred, plus outside seating on the north side under a canopy, for those wishing to not dine under the sun. Also, weather permitting, tables and chairs are set up on the west side for an hour or so of “Hanger Flying” engagement.

Bill Kinsman took over as airport manager at one point, taking charge of the luncheon preparations as well. Under his direction, the menu expanded to quite a variety of offerings, way beyond the sandwiches which had long been served. Bill served as club president and chief cook for about twenty years.

Today, we typically host twenty to forty airplanes on a given Friday, serving lunch to around a hundred guests. I remember that when we honored club member Paul Johns' with a special event for his 100th birthday, serving lunch to a couple hundred friends and admirers. Dining guests must be club members, or in the company of a member, to join in on a Friday lunch, the lifetime membership cost being \$10.00. For years and years, I've been hearing “outsider” comments from those who have flown in, expressing the wish that they had something like what we have at THEIR airport!

In existence for eight decades now, Central County Airport is privately owned, being maintained without local taxpayer burden. Through the years, the field originally known by its location identifier 68C, has evolved as a unique facility, especially appreciated by local flyers, and admired and envied by many far and wide!

Imposing Structure Out of the Past



What can you share with readers about this imposing structure out of the past . . .

Where? . . . What? . . . When? . . .

perhaps you have a particular personal recollection of an involvement experience related to it? We'd like to hear from you . . . just jot down your memories . . . for the enjoyment of present-day friends and neighbors . . . and historical preservation for future generations. Send them along by e-mail: iolahistoricalociety@gmail.com; by postal mail: IHS, P. O. Box 412, Iola, WI 54945; or stop by my office: 105 North Main Street; or leave a message by phone: 715-445-IOLA (4652).



Finishing Touches, Spring 2026

We did garner a couple verbal responses to the challenge published in the Spring 2026 issue of the *Window* – Finishing Touches – but I unfortunately failed to make note of the responding individuals. They both identified the location as that of the vacant building that still stands at 125 South Main Street. At the time the picture was taken, it was being renovated to serve the Iola Exchange of the Scandinavia Telephone Company. Not a single response has been received with suggestions for identifying the photos published in the Fall 2025 – The Family Sugarbush – or the Winter 2026 – The Family Farm – issues.



The Family Farm, Winter 2026



The Family Sugarbush, Fall 2025

Donors & Loaners

The Iola Historical Society expresses its appreciation to the following individuals and organizations for contributing during the past quarter donations to our archive of historical relics, and/or cash gifts, or in-kind services support benefitting its operations:

April – May – June

Archival Donations of Historic Relics:

Louis Adama (two vintage radio sets), Mike Amundson (1924 Bestul School Geography book, vintage Farmers State Bank of Iola metal savings bank), Brian Barlow (vintage six-unit Rosette iron), Betty Nassen (pair of Lee Nelson carvings, Lions souvenir pins), New London Historical Society (vintage Gloekler Ice Box).

Donations of Cash and In-Kind Services:

Jerry Finch (materials and labor on Chet Krause display cabinetry), Mark Lorge (materials and labor on Chet Krause display cabinetry), Betty Nassen (Afghan blanket donation for fundraiser), Joan Niemiec (cash for Log Cabin maintenance), Sara J. Sersland (cash for Log Cabin maintenance), Julian Wesley (cash donation for 1903 Ford Model A and 1894 Iola & Northern Depot maintenance), Kay M. Zelinka (in appreciation of Lee Halverson).

2026 Supporting Members

The Iola Historical Society wishes to express special thanks and recognition to the following individuals and organizations for their dedicated Supporting Member financial contributor status for the ongoing operational activities of the Society:

Louis & Louise Adams, Scott & Karri Bestul, LeRoy & Carolyn Borth, Mark & Ann Forseth, Mary & Charles Gipp, Donna Hooker, Iola & Rural Fire Service, Ruth C. Johnson, Lanna & Don Langdok, Dale & Robbie Louison, Thomas & Linda Martin, Too-Dars Diner.

Gone, But Fondly Recalled

Lest we forget, recalled below are valued friends and members who passed recently. Please remember them with appreciation, as you reflect on their valued contributions to preserving the heritage of our community and area.

Martha Louise (Nygaard) Cook

Passing away on March 13, 2026, Martha L. Cook was born in Iola on Sept. 27, 1935, to Electa (Jole) and Russel Nygaard. She was a graduate of Iola High School, returning to the community in retirement. Martha was an active member of the Nelsonville Lutheran Church, Sons of Norway and the Iola Historical Society, being engaged in the latter's activities since 1982. As a longtime member of the IHS, in 2009 she was recipient of our Docent of the Year recognition, and subsequently of the Volunteer of the Year recognition in 2014. Martha also enjoyed a longtime involvement with the quilting group and Alter Guild. Preceded in death by her husband, William Cook, her parents and brother Stanley, she is also survived by her daughters: Dawn (Cort) Martin, Lori Gerard, and Gail Terry; grandchildren Cortney Dueul, Roxanne Handzlik, Heather Terry, Chloe Terry, Christopher Gerard, Raychel Gerard, and one great-grandchild, Dahlia Terry; and special friend Bob Stamstad.

Roger Kenneth Nassen

Lifelong Iola resident Roger K. Nassen passed away March 29, 2026, at Aspirus Hospital in Wausau. He was born August 5, 1935, to the late Christian and Margaret (Nee Wendorf) Nassen, who preceded him in death, as did brothers, Barnie, Robert, Lester, Richard and Eugene, along with sisters Josephine Mork, Gladys Johnson, and Rose Johnson. Married 70 years, he and wife Betty – “Bets” – had two sons; Johnnie (Cindy) and Jimmie (Rosie) Nassen. After spending his early years working on the family farm, many years were later spent as a dedicated Waupaca Foundry employee. In addition to enjoying such pleasures as hunting, fishing, playing games and rolling dice, Roger was a dedicated member of the Iola Historical Society, always available when an extra hand was needed during events or on work projects. Recently, Roger and Betty for years had religiously tended to a flower arrangement, planted and maintained by them, near the replica 1901 Fire House located in our Iola Historic Village.

2026 EVENTS SCHEDULE

Sunday, June 28, 2026

11:00 am – 2:00 pm
2026 Annual Strawberry Fest
Fundraiser & Collectibles Fair

Monday, June 29, 2026

5:30 IHS Board Meeting
6:30 IHS Membership Meeting
7:00 Program

Monday, July 27, 2026

5:30 IHS Board Meeting
6:30 IHS Membership Meeting
7:00 Program

Monday, August 31, 2026

5:30 IHS Board Meeting
6:30 IHS Membership Meeting
7:00 Program

Monday, September 28, 2026

5:30 IHS Board Meeting
6:30 IHS Membership Meeting
7:00 Program

Saturday, October 3, 2026

10:00 am – 2:00 pm
2026 Annual Taste of Norway
& Lost Arts Fair; Including
Community Gift & Craft Show

Monday, October 26, 2026

5:30 IHS Board Meeting
6:30 IHS Membership Meeting
Last 2026 Business Meetings
2027 Board/Officer Elections
Discuss, Approve 2027 Budget
7:00 Program

Saturday, December 5, 2026

4:30 Post-Christmas Parade
Children Visit Santa Program
Hosted at IHS Machine Shed

Monday, December 14, 2026

2026 Annual IHS Christmas
Potluck Banquet & Program
Hosted at the Iola Mills Café

Monday, January 25, 2027

5:30 IHS Board Meeting
6:30 IHS Membership Meeting
First 2027 Business Meetings
7:00 Program

**All Members and General Public Welcome to
Attend All Meetings and Programs
(All IHS activities held at Depot Street
complex unless otherwise indicated.)**

