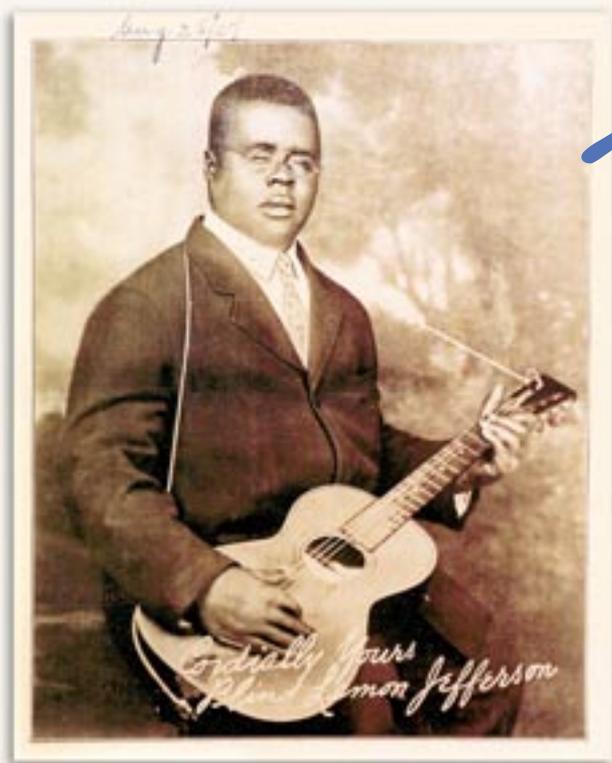




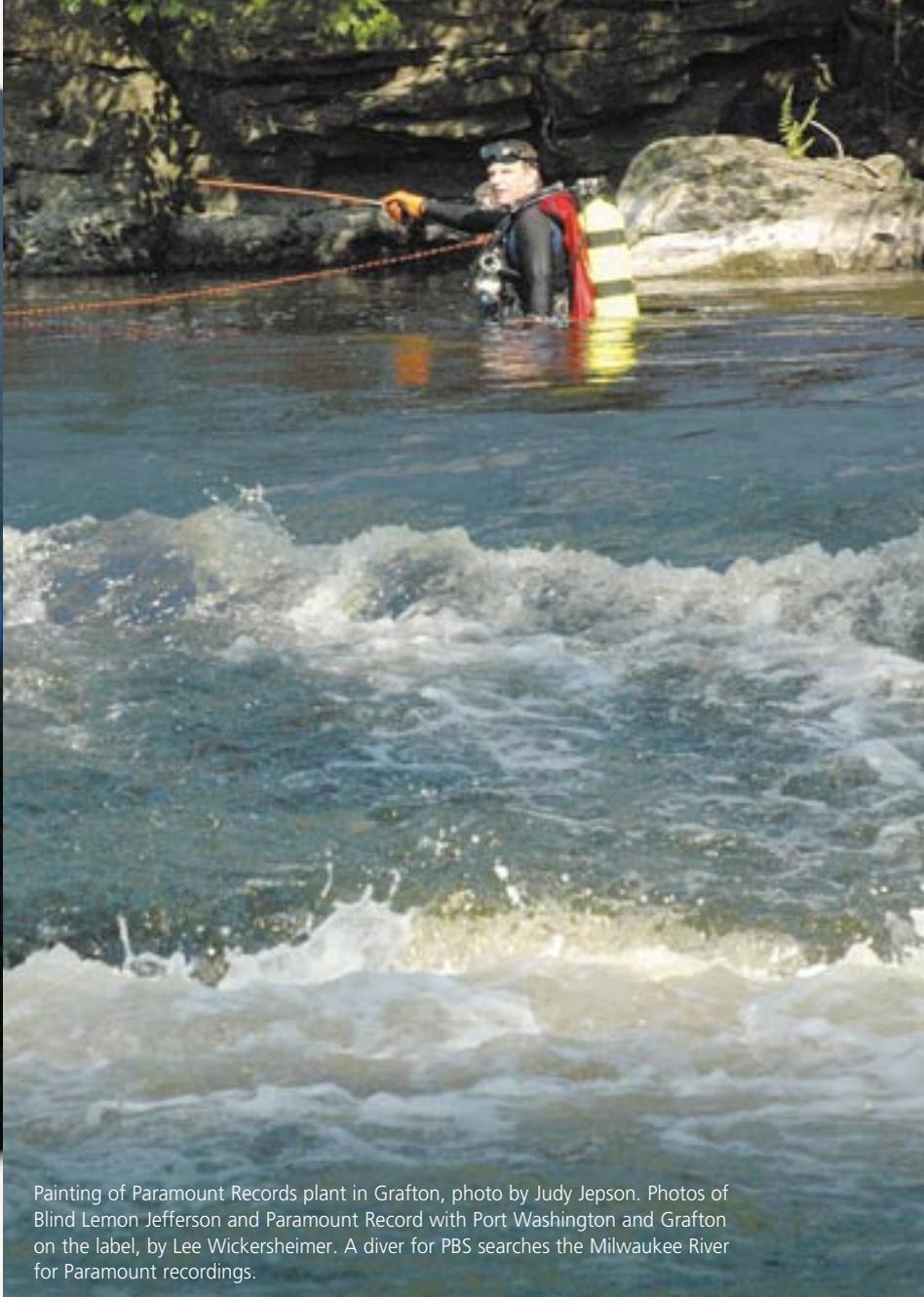
Paramount

Sings The *Blues*



BACK IN 1915, in a small town in the Midwest, a chair manufacturer making wooden phonograph cabinets for Edison Records, decided to create its own line of phonographs and records. Confident in its ability to succeed, the company slowly gained recognition and during its peak recording years in the 1920s and early '30s, produced a large number of jazz and blues records that eventually became recognized as *some of the greatest blues hits by black artists of that time*. Included among them were such names as Blind Lemon Jefferson, Charley Patton, Skip James, Ma Rainey, Blind Blake and others.

True blues fans today might know some of the details behind that company's well-known recording label, but few probably know where those records were produced. That surprising location was Grafton, right here in the Milwaukee area, and the company was the Wisconsin Chair Company, producer of the popular Paramount Records.



Painting of Paramount Records plant in Grafton, photo by Judy Jepson. Photos of Blind Lemon Jefferson and Paramount Record with Port Washington and Grafton on the label, by Lee Wickersheimer. A diver for PBS searches the Milwaukee River for Paramount recordings.

By Judy Jepson

Grafton resident, Patrick Mack, who, along with his wife, Angela, have become well-known local historians on the subject of Paramount Records, explained that the Wisconsin Chair Company was started in Port Washington, in 1888, to make chairs and other furniture. When they began manufacturing phonographs, they needed records to give out and decided to produce those records in Grafton.

The company established a pressing plant in Grafton, alongside the Milwaukee River, that eventually produced over 25 percent of the nation's early African-American blues and jazz records, "the type of music that American music is founded on," Angela noted. And the recording studio was set up in a building across the street from the pressing plant, with a viaduct that connected the two buildings.

Patrick explained that the sound or the music for a record was first recorded on wax, and from that a metal master was pressed which was then used to make the records. "The

artists originally sang into a large horn," Angela added. "The horn would vibrate and there was a string at the end with a needle attached and it would etch into the wax.

"Pat and I aren't really the experts on the subject," Angela pointed out, "we received all of our information from Alex van der Tuuk, author of the book *Paramount's Rise and Fall—A History of the Wisconsin Chair Company and its Recording Activities*. He spent 10 years of his life researching this book and made several trips here from his home in the Netherlands. He is also co-owner of the ParamountsHome.Org website." (The Mack's are the other co-owners.) Angela noted there's very little hard, historical information available about this subject, other than what Alex has provided.

"Alex is also finishing up another book called *Out of the Anonymity*, about Wisconsin dance bands that recorded here—their music was also pressed here," Angela explained, then proudly added, "Lawrence Welk was one of the



orchestras that recorded in Grafton.”

Although the records were pressed and recorded in Grafton, they were mailed from the Port Washington home office. After a number of years of success, the Depression and other circumstances forced the closing of the Grafton facility, in 1932, but not until over 1,630 recordings had been produced. Besides African-American blues and jazz, other music recorded there included local dance bands, German music and country music. Black Swan Records were also pressed at Grafton, as were a number of other labels. At one time over 600 people were employed at the Grafton plant.

When the Grafton facility closed, much of the equipment, including metal masters, thousands of records, record sleeves and recording ledgers, was moved to the Port Washington facility, Plant #2—a building that is still in existence and is currently owned by Simplicity Manufacturing Company. The items remained dormant there for almost a decade. Some people today remember that as kids they “found their way into the facility” and used the records as Frisbees, often sailing them off the roof of the building and sometimes shooting at them with shotguns. After World War II started and scrap metal and paper drives were formed, the story goes that most of the stored inventory was sold to scrap dealers.

Another story that has circulated around Grafton for decades is that when Paramount went out of business, some of the master recordings and 78 rpm records were

dumped into the river next to the factory. Curious about these “rumors/stories”, Angela wrote a letter to the popular PBS show “History Detectives”, suggesting they do a segment on Paramount Records and whether these master recordings still exist on the bottom of the river. This nationally syndicated show features a group of researchers who help people find answers to historical questions usually centering on an old house, family heirloom, or other historic object or structure.

Of the approximately 1,000 story ideas received by the show annually, only 27 are made into segments for airing each season—and Grafton is one of them. A number of weeks ago, a PBS film crew visited Grafton, complete with a dive team to search a segment of the Milwaukee River for master recordings. And what were the results after a day of diving? No one around here knows. PBS has been tight-lipped and would only confirm that the Grafton segment will air this month. (“History Detectives” can be seen in the Milwaukee area Monday nights at 8:00—watch the local listings for the date it will run.)

After Paramount closed, the Penning Corporation bought the facility and began producing Bakelite (plastic) products. In 1939, Wisconsin Plastics, Inc. took over the old pressing plant and by November 1939, the building housing the recording studio and the viaduct were torn down. The pressing factory was taken down a few years later.

Grafton Village president James Brunnuell explained that he hadn't

really understood what Paramount Records meant to the village until Angela got him involved. “As I started looking at what had actually happened here in the village and what it meant to the music industry, it was starting to look like we could tie-in Paramount Records with what we were doing with our downtown redevelopment effort.” He felt it could give a real identity to the community.

So Brunnuell organized a meeting of area representatives and village officials to talk about the importance of this to the community. “Out of that meeting, Paramount GIG (Grooves In Grafton) was formed as a nonprofit organization with a mission statement directed at the education and preservation of the Paramount music industry,” he said. Since the redevelopment that was going on had nothing to do with music—Brunnuell sent the plans for the downtown redevelopment “back to the drawing board.”

And the result is that the new “Paramount Plaza”, in the heart of Grafton, will include a “Keyboard” Walk-Of-Fame, a timeline and kiosk that will feature history about Paramount and possibly more ideas. Angela pointed out, “Now that people know about this, it's like it has started a Paramount Revival.”

Part of that revival includes an Inaugural Paramount Blues Festival, sponsored by the newly formed Grafton Blues Association, to be held September 23rd at Grafton's Lime Kiln Park, with Alex van der Tuuk in attendance to autograph his book (which will be on sale). And—also taking part in the festival will be the *last surviving Paramount blues recording artist*, Henry James Townsend, who will return to Grafton after 76 years to *perform once again*.

Mr. Townsend's return is made possible thanks to Grafton State Bank and Alex van der Tuuk. For complete details on the Blues Festival, log onto www.graftonblues.org.

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