

Not Your Mother's Library Transcript

Mini-Episode 17: Old World Wisconsin

(Brief intro music)

Leah: Hello, and welcome to another mini-episode of Not Your Mother's Library, a readers' advisory podcast by the Oak Creek Public Library. I'm one of your co-hosts, Leah, and I'm once again sitting in my living room and recording a hopefully entertaining mini-podcast episode for you guys! I want to talk this week about a place that is near and dear to my heart, Old World Wisconsin. If you guys aren't familiar with Old World, let me give you a little information. This episode will mostly be a plug for Old World Wisconsin, which you can't actually visit right now, and then a little readers' advisory for a series that takes place there. Old World Wisconsin is an 'open air museum' located in Eagle, Wisconsin. It is a Wisconsin historical site operated by the Wisconsin Historical Society. I'll link the website for Old World in our show notes so at least you can explore the page at your leisure. Hopefully we'll have access to Old World again once we can go out in public at will. Old World Wisconsin was established in 1976, a full decade prior to me arriving in the world, and it depicts daily life of 19th-century settlers in the Wisconsin area. What's sort of cool about it is that each of the typical ethnicities that populated Wisconsin at that time each have their own little section of the museum. And 'little section' might be a bit of a misnomer because the museum covers 480 acres of ground. Not all of that is open to public wandering, but a very good portion of it is. There are roads that connect each section of the museum, and if you don't want the exercise—or can't make that long of a walk—there is a tram that runs on a schedule from village to village. They have all sorts of farm animals there and live reenactors who portray what daily life would have looked like back then. Back in college, one of my friends who was majoring in history was actually able to get an internship there which she thoroughly enjoyed. It's also cool to know that the people you're interacting with there who are reenacting what life was like are either degreed or have been really trained in what life was like back then. They have games that kiddos can play, too, and I will be describing those in a bit more detail a little later. Well, one of them. Also, I learned semi-recently that they have a few days over the summer where they have a reenactment of how beer would have been brewed back in the 1800s. I really want to attend one of those this summer, so I guess I'll just keep my ear perked to see if anything gets scheduled once Safer at Home is lifted. Now, I learned some fascinating things while I was researching Old World Wisconsin. I did reference a Wikipedia article about the history of the site, so take some of this with a grain of salt, but I did check the citations for the facts that seemed a bit crazy. Also, some of it is anecdotal, told to me by my parents and neighbors when I was quite young. I did enjoy getting to call my dad and have a nice, long chat with him about Old World Wisconsin. We had a wonderful walk down memory lane together, and I got a few childhood memories verified and/or clarified. A lot of things had to come together to make this museum possible. It was a huge undertaking. Interestingly enough, the concept started out as a class project. You see, the University of Wisconsin Department of Landscape Architecture and the Wisconsin Historical Society teamed up and developed a class. The class then came up with the general outline of how Old World Wisconsin could look, and then two graduate students continued to develop the project. Doesn't that sound like an absolutely fascinating school project? To know that you're working on something that might potentially come to life, and how cool would it be to be able to actually go and visit what you created? Another interesting thing was where the project would be located. The Wisconsin Department

of Natural Resources actually transferred land that used to be part of the Kettle Moraine State Forest to the State Historical Society so that this could be built. That land was located in Eagle, Wisconsin and, in fact, residents did not want the museum! I guess they were concerned about environmental impact, and something about zoning... All I really gathered from the article is that they tried to halt work, the state filed a suit for fifty thousand dollars in damages, and then the city of Eagle counter-sued for five million dollars. And since we ended up having that museum placed in Eagle, eventually the town agreed to drop their suit if the state did. Thus, we have the beautiful Old World Wisconsin located in Eagle. So, what you might not know about me—and I don't know why you would know this—was that I spent the first five years of my life in a tiny, little unincorporated Wisconsin town named Caldwell. I grew up hearing my dad tell us that a building from Caldwell had been saved and transported to Old World Wisconsin. It follows, then, that we made lots of visits to Old World while I was growing up. I think my dad felt it was a great place to let us kids run and run and run and run around but also learn something. Which...it still is! And, prior to talking to my dad about this, I was 100% convinced that the special building we went to see all the time from Caldwell was some kind of farming building. I didn't really know which one, and when I'd go as an adult I suppose I just accepted that there was a special Caldwell building there. But in writing this, I wanted to do a bit of research and see if I could figure out what building it actually was. I had a list with pictures pulled up, and I was looking through all of the farming buildings, just hoping that something would catch my eye. Except nothing did. So, I decided to go straight to the source: my dad. I thought he might enjoy a walk down memory lane, and it was an exceptionally fruitful conversation! He immediately said it was a town hall building, which threw me for a loop because the town hall building which was relocated to Old World Wisconsin was from Harmony, Wisconsin, and that was clearly marked. Then it just jumped out at me, y'all. Farmer's Hall. Which clearly I as a child added farmer plus building that was at Old World Wisconsin, and that came out to me that there was a farming building there. But no, I very clearly recognized Farmer's Hall which bears a sign on its front stating its name and that it was established in 1874. My dad asked if I had any memories of that hall, and I do. I remember playing at Old World Wisconsin with a historical game where you have a hoop and a stick. You roll the hoop and use the stick to run after it and keep it upright and rolling. If any listeners have visited Old World, I'm sure you have at least a vague idea of the game I'm talking about. Anyways, I'm pretty sure I played that game right out in front of Farmer's Hall. But...that wasn't what my dad referred to. He took me even a bit further back in time. You see, Farmer's Hall wasn't relocated to Old World Wisconsin until about 1990. Prior to that, it sat in Caldwell, Wisconsin, sandwiched between a residential house which was owned by the Mich family at that time and a Methodist church. Just a bit down the road from that was the farmhouse where we lived. So, we were in pretty close proximity to Farmer's Hall when it was in Caldwell. My dad shared with me that the space had a stage at one end and beautiful hardwood floors inside, and I remembered that from my visits to Old World Wisconsin. He couldn't remember the stage being used for anything in Caldwell, although I'm sure historically it would have been used for speakers and awards and that kind of thing—maybe a band. His fondest memories of that building, though, were that they had basketball hoops installed on each end of the hall. I guess people used to go in there for pick-up games of basketball back in the '80s. He said he liked it because it was smaller than a traditional court and that presented a different twist on the game. I guess he used to take my brother and I to this Farmer's Hall, and we'd all play basketball. I mean, I would have been, like, four at the oldest, so I'm sure I was no help. Come to think of it, I'd still be no help. I'm sure I played off to the side or hey, maybe up on that stage safely out of the way. It was really nice to hear my dad talk so fondly about when I was a kiddo. And it really blew my mind that a building like Farmer's Hall, which I can picture so clearly at Old

World Wisconsin and have so many memories with, is the building that my dad has such great memories with only in such a different way. I'm really glad it was saved, even if the piece of history that means so much to me won't really mean much to other people. Now, onto the reader's advisory portion of this. Long ago, I picked up a book entitled "Old World Murder." It caught my eye because I have long loved Old World Wisconsin—which I think you all understand by now—and the title evoked, for obvious reasons, memories of the place. I was thoroughly intrigued when I read the back cover and realized it was written by a local author and was, in fact, was set at Old World Wisconsin! I don't really read mysteries very often. They're just not my jam. But for a while, I wanted to see if my reading tastes had changed. You see, I firmly believe that they change just like your taste buds do. Maybe not every seven years, but still, I like to try new things. I like to occasionally try new genres or titles and see if I can break out of my normal mould. Anyways, I picked this one up and it sat on my 'want to read it someday' bookshelf. And yes, that bookshelf is packed with books. I like to think I have a great system down: I grab books I want to read for very cheap when I can, keep them in great condition, and then after I read them I list them on Amazon. Unless, of course, it was so good that it makes it on my 'gonna re-read this for sure' bookshelf. I'm not sure if Old World Murder will make it onto my 'gonna re-read this' bookshelf, but I don't think I'll list it for sale. I think it's earned a place on my shelf solely for the fact that it reminds me of Old World Wisconsin, and I enjoyed the story. Now, there are currently 10 books written in the "Chloe Ellefson Mystery" series written by Kathleen Ernst. I do plan on seeing if I can locate the next book in the series, "The Heirloom Murders," though I'm not sure I'll purchase it. I think I'll utilize the magic of the library and find a copy that way. Oak Creek doesn't hold a copy, but there is an electronic audiobook available on OverDrive. I've placed my hold and, hopefully, I'll get my hands—so to speak—on it soon. "Old World Murder" is set in 1982, and to be entirely honest, I'm not sure I would have grabbed the book if I knew it was set in the '80s. I'm just not the biggest fan of historical books, especially very recent history. Also, I just want to mention it pains me to call a book historical when I was alive—or almost alive—during that time. Our main character is Chloe Ellefson, who has just landed a curator position at Old World Wisconsin following some pretty dark times in her life. Throughout the book, we follow the trail of this interesting and rare artifact: a nineteenth-century Norwegian ale bowl. There's murder, adventures, and all kinds of trouble. I must admit, a lot of the time I had a hard time remembering we were in the '80s, and during much of the trouble I just kept wondering why she didn't pull her cell phone out and solve the problem. So, maybe I wasn't quite as immersed in the book as I wanted to be. I still don't think mysteries are my genre, but I did enjoy reading this one enough that I'll read—or, rather, listen to—the next. Maybe hearing will help me immerse! I did really enjoy the author, Kathleen Ernst's, writing. Straight from her bio on Amazon, she is an "Award-winning writer...[and] the bestselling author of thirty-eight published mysteries, historical fiction, and nonfiction history books for adults and young readers." I am quite a fan of nonfiction so am very interested in tracking down those titles that she's written. They look like they'd be similar to the books written by Jerry Apps. If you guys aren't familiar with Jerry Apps, he's another local Wisconsin author who writes a lot of books about farms, living on a farm, and history of the area. That's it for this mini-episode of Not Your Mother's Library. I hope you guys enjoyed listening, and please take a moment to like and subscribe if you did enjoy. I'll be sure to list everything I mentioned in the show notes, and please join me in keeping your fingers crossed that we get back to normal soon and can visit Old World Wisconsin once again. Until next time, happy reading. Bye!

(Brief outro music)