A look back at 2006

Some of the top stories in 2006 as reported in the Tomahawk Leader.

**Lincoln County loses two soldiers; Merrill unit returns home from Iraq**

Lincoln County lost two soldiers in Iraq: 25-year-old U.S. Army 3rd Heavy Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Spc. Grant Allen Dampier and 20-year-old Army National Guard Spc. Ryan Jopek, both of Merrill. Dampier, whose unit was out of Colorado, had been serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom for just five months when he was killed in May. He was riding as a gunner in a civilian pickup truck outside the city of Balad when an improvised explosive device detonated. Jopek was about to complete his final convoy security mission with the 4th Platoon, A Company, 2-127 Infantry Battalion and return to the United States when he was killed Aug. 2 by an explosive device near Tikrit, Iraq. Jopek’s unit was the Merrill-based Troop E, 105th Calvary 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry.

Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 127th Infantry were welcomed home shortly after in August. The battalion of 600 National Guard members returned to Wisconsin soil after serving more than a year overseas.

**Rise in blasto cases**

Around 20 cases of blastomycosis were reported in Lincoln County in 2006. The disease claimed the life of Tristan “Gracie Lou” Muenchow, a 16-year-old Merrill High School student, who died Feb. 14, less than a day after being diagnosed. In Tomahawk, local businesswoman, Michele “Shelly” Kahle, 47, learned she had contracted the fungus in October. She spent several months in the hospital in critical condition. Shelly came home just before Christmas and continues to recover. Lincoln County had the second highest incident rate in the state between 2001 and 2005. The county health department is working on a study of the disease with Marshfield Clinic.

**Gun battle a farce**

A running gun battle through the woods in the town of Tomahawk in April was determined to be a fabricated tale by alleged victim, John “Homer” Van Meter, 52, a Rhinelander area logger. He told authorities he was at work in the forest when two men got out of a black sport-utility vehicle with guns and fired at him. He said he shot back and a “running gun battle” ensued during which Van Meter suffered four gunshot wounds. The Lincoln and Oneida County Sheriff’s Departments closed the case in June based on lack of evidence. Authorities determined the two men never existed and Van Meter’s gunshot wounds were likely self-inflicted. Van Meter faces two charges of obstructing an officer. He pled “not guilty” in September. The investigation cost upwards of $10,000 to $20,000.

**Neglected animals rescued**

More than 20 dogs, three horses and numerous birds were rescued from a home near Merrill in January in what Lincoln County Sheriff’s Department authorities called one of the worst cases of animal neglect they had ever seen. The animals were taken to the Lincoln County Humane Society and private homes. Some did not survive. Barbara A. Calkins, W3195 County Road C, was charged with 38 counts of intentionally failing to provide food or water for animals, felony bail jumping, misdemeanor counts of disorderly conduct, obstructing an officer and resisting arrest. Her estranged husband, Terry Calkins, 53, was later charged with 27 counts of intentionally failing to provide food or water for animals. Both cases remain open in circuit court.

**Man dies in skydiving incident**

A Tomahawk Regional Airport “Fun Day Fly In” ended in tragedy after a deadly skydiving incident in August when Richard John Symonds’ parachute failed to open. Symonds, who was with two other skydivers, jumped from a plane at an estimated 6,000 feet and, for an unknown reason, his main chute
failed to open. He did have a reserve chute. An attorney in Wisconsin Rapids, Symonds, 42, was a veteran parachutist who had recorded close to 400 jumps.

Record year for Fall Ride

The Sept. 14-17 Tomahawk Fall Ride motorcycle rally reached record numbers in its 25th anniversary year as the Muscular Dystrophy Association (MDA) reported an estimated 45,000 people attended. The fund raiser raised $141,000 for MDA, bringing the grand total over the years to around $1.5 million. Visitors took part in events at SARA Park, Harley-Davidson Tomahawk Operations, downtown and throughout the Northwoods region.

Two Tomahawk men race Iditarod

Veteran Iditarod racer, Dr. Ron Cortte, along with rookie musher Chad Schouweiler, both of Tomahawk, traveled to Alaska with 32 dogs for the “Last Great Race on Earth,” a 1,100-mile trek from Anchorage to Nome at the end of February. Cortte, who also competed in 1980, 1982 and 1984, made his fourth Iditarod finish in 64th place and Schouweiler completed his first trek in 61st.

Burglary ring busted

Sixty-five burglary and four arson cases were cracked in November as seven individuals were taken into custody. Arrested were Jacob D. Baars, 19, and Michael F. Leet, 20, both of Tomahawk, Raymond A.R. Mikkelson, 22, Evan P. Kagie, 20, Lisa M. Darrin, 19, all of Rhinelander, and Kevin M. Delp, 20, and Peter A. Delp, 24, of Merrill. The joint investigation was conducted by the Lincoln and Oneida County Sheriff’s Departments. Officers executed two state search warrants in Brooklyn Park, Minn., and a third search warrant in Dunn County. Recovered stolen items included 13 firearms, computers, sporting goods and other property. The investigation revealed the seven individuals formed burglary rings to steal and dispose of property from remote cabins in western Oneida County and Lincoln County. Four arsons also were allegedly committed.

In addition, Baars and Mikkelson were charged with burglarizing a Tomahawk business and, just weeks after, with shooting and killing one horse and injuring another in the town of Skanawan.

All cases remain open in Lincoln County Circuit Court.

Lincoln County in federal court

Federal subpoenas were issued to Lincoln County Administrative Coordinator John Mulder, Finance Director Dan Leydet, Corporation Counsel Nancy Bergstrom, Clerk of Courts Cindy Kimmons, Clerk Bob Kunkel and former Social Services Director Jim Bestul in August, commanding they provide documents to a grand jury of the United States District Court. Sought were all written or electronic documentation between county employees and/or County Board supervisors regarding child support services rendered to the state from 1998 to 2005. An October 2004 audit by the Wisconsin Bureau of Child Support concluded the county had not appropriately documented work it did for the state on child support cases. State officials wanted $282,000 in restitution for unsubstantiated charges incurred between 2002-04. Following negotiations, that total was reduced to about $30,000, a number the county is still disputing. Lincoln County was represented at a closed hearing before the federal grand jury in late October.

County building moving forward

Throughout 2006, Lincoln County moved forward toward constructing a new administration building and renovating the Safety Building and historic Courthouse. In February, supervisors voted to affirm the estimated $12.4 million building plan and create a Building Committee comprised of five supervisors. The board directed the Building Committee in March to put together draft plans for the three construction projects. The architectural firm Ayers and Associates was hired in July to professionally draft the plans.

In November, the Building Committee and Ayers and Associates brought a construction plan before the County Board, which was approved. Bonding also was recently authorized for more than $9 million for the three buildings and just over $2 million for the jail pod in three to four years.
Star wrestler stripped of state title

Then-Tomahawk High School senior Anthony Lampe, 19, was stripped of his Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association (WIAA) state individual wrestling championship and charged in Lincoln County Circuit Court for hitting his 16-year-old sister in a sibling dispute. Lampe was arrested Feb. 22 and charged the next day with felony child abuse for striking his sister in the nose during an argument in the family van on the way home from school. He was slated to participate in the WIAA wrestling tournament that weekend in Madison, however, the Tomahawk School District said he was not eligible to do so. Lampe’s parents successfully filed a request for a temporary injunction to reinstate their son’s athletic privileges. Lampe went on to earn first place in the Division 2, 112-pound class. Lincoln County Judge Jay Tlusty lifted the injunction the following week and the school imposed a retroactive three-contracted-event punishment, making Lampe ineligible for the state wrestling match. The senior appealed the district’s decision, but was denied. The WIAA ultimately stripped Lampe of his state title in May. He pled guilty before Tlusty to lesser misdemeanor charges of battery and disorderly conduct after reaching a plea agreement to dismiss the felony child abuse charge. He was sentenced to probation and $100 in fines. The probation was later rescinded so Lampe could wrestle in college in Minnesota. He would not have been permitted to do so on probation.