
WHITE COUNTY HISTORIAN

Volume 23, Issue 2

April - June, 2017



"Preserving and
Promoting our History"

2017 CALENDAR OF EVENTS

CORN DAYS
CORN TASTING &
MUSEUMS OPEN
OCTOBER

PIONEER DAYS FOR WHITE
COUNTY 5TH GRADERS
WITH THE RETIRED TEACHER'S
ASSOC.
MATSEL CABIN
OCTOBER

FALL DINNER MEETING
FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
NOVEMBER

MUSEUMS OPEN DURING
WHITE COUNTY CHRISTMAS

NOTES FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dear Members,

The big Oak Tree at the Robinson-Stewart House is down and the house is safe, we can thank Pat Owen and gang for a job well done. There was a small amount of public dissatisfaction with removing a 100 plus year old tree that the Board believed was presently or in the near future threatening the oldest house in Carmi. The City of Carmi also believed it was a threat to its overhead electrical wires that supplies a large part of downtown Carmi with electricity. Nobody wants to see a tree as majestic as it was removed but we have to face reality, nothing lives forever. Losing two parents in the last year and one half has reminded me of that. A tree expert told us the tree was dying, it could last twenty years or it could go down completely or partially tomorrow. We did what we thought was right to protect the Robinson-Stewart House.

When you are forced to defend a decision you make it requires you to "think about" why you made the decision in the first place. "thinking about things" was a good thing because it led me to the White County Historical Society's Mission Statement. It reads as follows. "To preserve and promote the historical interest of White County through our Stewardship of its artifacts and historical sites and educational programs and exhibits that we provide for its people." Safeguarding the Robinson-Stewart House from a falling limb from a dying Oak Tree definitely falls under our mission statement. As much as I would have liked to have seen the tree survive, I believe everyone reading this newsletter would rather see the 200 plus year old Robinson-Stewart house survive for another 200 years.

We have two cross cut sections of the tree trunk which after it cures we hope to display outside on the north side of the house. The tree was 110 to 120 years old, I have had a hard time counting the rings accurately. We hope to mark on the tree rings historical events that happened that year of the tree's life. I believe this will be a significant addition to the historical experience of the Robinson-Stewart House and the tree will live on as an educational exhibit.

David M. Brown, President

NEWS FROM THE MARY SMITH FAY GENEALOGY LIBRARY

by: Librarian Diane Waggoner

PO Box 121, 203 North Church St., Carmi, IL
618-382-8425 email: w.c.h.s-genealogy@hotmail.com
11:30 a.m. - 4:30 p.m., Tuesday - Friday

I would like to thank Reid McCallister for sending this article/articles to me that he found on Newspaper.com, about the Rev. John Beck. Reid said that John got his start preaching at the Carmi Evangelical Church here in Carmi, was in the Civil War, then headed west. Reid has done years of research on the Beck family and is very good about sharing. He would like to hear from Beck relatives to share and discuss the history on this Beck family, so give him a call 706-548-4664 or email him at reidmccallister@charter.net

Journal Gazette (Mattoon, Illinois) Mon, Jun 26, 1916 - page 6
Circuit Rider Of Early Days Is Dead

Kansas City, Kansas June 26 - Rev. John Beck who for many years was a circuit rider in the days when Kansas City and Kansas were lightly populated is dead here. He was seventy two years old. Mr. Beck was the first Evangelical minister to preach a sermon in Kansas City. That was in 1870. He was assigned to a circuit in that year which included Leavenworth, Wyandotte and Kansas City. He preached here every two weeks. His first services were conducted in a dwelling on Oak Street between Eighth and Tenth, at a time when that part of Kansas City was the outskirts of the town. Between there and Brush Creek lay many fine farms and timber lands and log cabins were plentiful. The experiences of Mr. Beck as a circuit rider in the early days of Kansas make an interesting story. He traveled the circuit for many years known as the Western Kansas Mission., and the country was known as the home of the savage and the haunt of the "bad men." At Falls City, Neb. on one occasion, he was shot through the arm by a "bad man" of the plains and would have bled to death but for the timely arrival of a doctor from a point seven miles away. This doctor was no other than a Indian medicine man. In 1868 Dr. Beck was shot while at a camp meeting because he objected to the sales of liquor in his camp. On one occasion, while traveling on horseback between Topeka and Mission Creek, Kansas the circuit rider lost his way among the Pottawatomie Indians, none of whom could speak English. They were outwardly friendly, but Mr. Beck welcomed the arrival of a frontiersman who directed him to Topeka. Prior to coming west, Dr. Beck rode circuits in Illinois, Ohio and Michigan. He came to live in Kansas City about a dozen years ago and was engaged in the real estate business during the latter years of his life. His last pastorate was at Warrensburgh Mo.

The Titusville Herald Titusville, PA Sat, Aug 26, 1871 - page 2
Rowdyism

Leavenworth, Kas, August 25 - Rev. John Beck a minister of this place, was seriously beaten and shot by a gang of rowdies at a camp-meeting, near Rulo, Nebraska, a few days since.

RESEARCH FEES

If you would like us to do research for you (White County area only), please contact us.
Cost of research is \$15 per hour. Copies are 20 - 25¢ each. Shipping & handling is \$5.

Come and visit us and we will help you do your research at no cost to you, all you pay for is the cost of copies.

TIDBITS

by: Kathleen Rister

Having recently begun a new career in Grayville, I thought it would be nice to share a little of the history from that area of our county. Now, I've always been interested in Eleanor Roosevelt; I have a quote of hers on my desk at home, "No one can make you feel inferior without your consent." To my surprise, I discovered that Mrs. Roosevelt had a tie, of sorts, to Grayville, even visiting the community for a few days in 1936!

First, a little background information taking us back 162 years to 1855. That's when James M. Helm was born in Grayville. His family were successful farmers and when James was 15 years old, he attended the U.S. Naval Academy. His distinguished career is the makings of another article, but let's just say, James had a very successful career. He rose to the rank of Admiral and was awarded the Navy Cross. During his career, James met Edith Benham of Virginia, and much later the couple were married. They spent their summers at their home in Grayville. The home is no longer standing, but the site is diagonally across the corner from Grayville's current library.

Here's where the connection to Eleanor Roosevelt comes in. Edith Helm had her own distinguished career, being social secretary for First Ladies Edith Wilson, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Bess Truman. In June of 1936, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, attended the dedication of the George Rogers Clark Memorial in Vincennes, with FDR speaking at the occasion. Upon learning of the event, and its proximity to Grayville, Mrs. Helm and Mrs. Roosevelt planned a visit to Mrs. Helm's summer home in Grayville!

The First Lady spent two days in the home of Edith Helm. Grayville's residents flew into a flurry of activity sprucing up the town for the visit. The two days were crammed with activities for Eleanor Roosevelt. She went to the Civilian Conservation Corps Camp in Grayville and ate with 150 youth. There was a garden reception for the First Lady at the Helm home, which was filled with flowers sent by local residents to greet Mrs. Roosevelt. She also visited Grayville's former library, a Carnegie library. There, Eleanor viewed the display of Works Progress Administration handiwork, selecting a rug and a necktie for her husband, FDR.

The highlight of the visit, though, was a huge community picnic held at the farm of Mr. and Mrs. D. F. Frost, about a mile north of Grayville. Estimates on the attendance range from 6,000 to 10,000. So, suffice it to say, it was one whopper of an event! The events for the day included a variety of contests, including horseshoe pitching, rolling pin throwing, foot races, hog calling, a "fat man's race", wood splitting, and husband calling. All accounts relate that Eleanor Roosevelt thoroughly enjoyed the day! Which really doesn't surprise me. My mom grew up during the depression, and I can remember her talking about how much Mrs. Roosevelt was admired because "she was as common as an old shoe", which was meant as a sincere compliment to Eleanor's ability to relate to everyday people.

Just imagine...the First Lady of one of the most trying eras of this country's history, the Depression, enjoyed time and friends in Grayville, right here in White County. When I look out my window at work, I can see the very yard where she enjoyed White County hospitality!

A special thank you to Pat Seil of The Navigator and Denny Reese of the magazine, The Wanderer, for allowing me to share their research. More information was found in the book Good Old Grayville, based on the newspaper articles of Herschel Groff. These publications can be found at Groff Memorial Public Library & Museum in Grayville. ✍

SPRING DINNER MEETING

by: Barry Cleveland

Buttons once made from Wabash River shells

The people of Grayville—and the ecosystem of the river that flows past the city—were changed significantly a little over a century ago, thanks to a German entrepreneur who likely never set foot in the community.

Johann F. Boepple was a German button maker who, casting about in the 1880s for a better source of raw materials, turned to mussel shells from the Midwestern United States.

His story—and the story of the industry he founded—were the subject of the program at the April 10 spring dinner meeting of the White County Historical Society, held at the First Christian Church Fellowship Hall in Carmi.

The speaker was Perry Garner of Albion, described by society President David Brown as one of the only people alive who is knowledgeable about the musseling industry on the Wabash River.

Garner spoke to the organization at length Monday night and brought along part of his extensive collection of mussel shells, buttons and belt buckles made from them, tools used to process them and other materials.

Boepple founded the Mississippi River pearl button industry in 1884, and by 1890, Muscatine, Iowa was known as the Pearl Button Capital of the World. Historical sources estimate that 2,500 workers were eventually employed in 43 different button-related businesses in that community. And associated businesses were established on other Midwestern rivers, including the Illinois—and the Wabash.

Garner noted that Boepple began harvesting mussels from the Mississippi simply by wading barefoot into the shallow stretches of the river, feeling the shells impact his feet and reaching down to retrieve them.

The shells (which were closed) were brought to shore and boiled to kill the mussels, allowing workers to open the shells and retrieve the remains, which were searched for pearls and then discarded.

Boepple developed lathes to cut out circular portions of the shells, drill holes (through which thread could later be extended) and imprint designs on the buttons, Garner said.

Eventually improved machinery was designed to harvest and process the shells, and the industry spread throughout the Midwest. A factory was established at Grayville, Garner said, where “blanks” were punched out of shells. The blanks were then shipped elsewhere (principally to Muscatine), where they were converted into buttons.

Garner said it’s been estimated that the hands of 30 people touched a typical shell from the time it was lifted from a riverbed until buttons were produced from it.

Hundreds of fishermen searched riverbeds for the shells. In time, Garner said, the rivers were overharvested and thousands of mussel beds were obliterated. The population has never



Perry Garner

SPRING DINNER MEETING (CONTINUED)

fully recovered, he added, even though the demand for the buttons ended at mid-century when plastic replaced the shells as the source material for most buttons.

Garner added these gems of information in a question-and-answer session:

- Discarded shells once littered river banks and factory grounds and can often be found along area river banks today; the shells were sometimes used for road base or ground up and used for chicken grit.
- Musseling was conducted not just on the area's major rivers but also on streams as small as Bonpas Creek, near Grayville.
- While it's believed that native Americans ate the meat of mussels, it's not considered edible for humans today.
- A very limited amount of musseling is done legally today in Tennessee and other Southern states. The harvested shells are shipped to Japan, where tiny sections of shells are surgically implanted into oyster shells. Mother of pearl is added and the oysters create cultured pearls.

Brown introduced Garner as "an avid outdoorsman" who has been interested in natural history throughout his life. He has been researching mussels and the mussel shell button industry—and collecting shells, buttons and other shell products--for over 40 years.

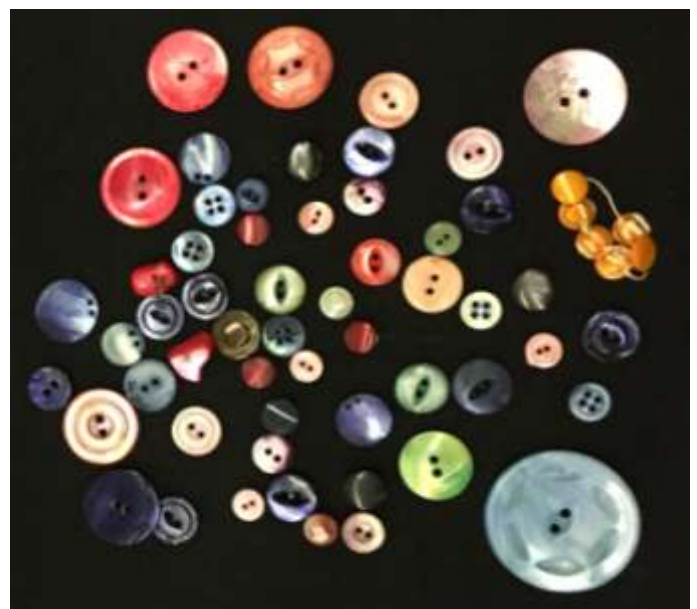
Garner graciously noted that it's "all hobby to me" and that "I'm not really an expert."

The program followed a meal catered by Yesterday's of Carmi.

In his first dinner meeting after assuming the society's presidency in January, Brown expressed appreciation to his predecessors, particularly the late Kent F.P. "Mr. Kent" Boeger, who died recently.

"I hope we all can live life as graciously and with as much as enthusiasm as he did," the president added.

He also introduced Camden Stewart, who is interning with the society at present, as well as other society officers and board members..✍



SPRING DINNER MEETING (CONTINUED)

Musseling on the Wabash: some pearls from the past

Musseling along the Wabash River was once compared with the California gold rush of 1849. Here are some excerpts about musseling from Carmi newspapers of the early 20th century:

- August 1903: The mussel shell industry is growing to be important at Maunie. It employs several people. Three carloads of the shells were spotted last week on the tracks, ready for shipping. The shells are said to sell for ten cents a bushel and are used for buttons.
- October 1903: Mussel shell fever is high in Maunie. The Wabash River is full of boatmen dragging the bottom. Lonzo Edwards and Tobe Rice found a handsome pearl last week and Capt. Fred Vettors bought it for \$250 on the spot. Charles Washington turned down \$100 for another pearl and wants \$150. To the average Maunie citizen, \$100 is a mere bagatelle (trifle).
- November 1903: Wes Vines found the finest pearl yet discovered in the Wabash River at Maunie and sold it this morning for \$695.
- Men are drifting toward Maunie as excitement builds over the mussel trade. Farmers are leaving their fields to join the wild stampede for wealth. It beats the California gold fever. A man can make between \$3 and \$10 a day shell fishing, even if he never finds a pearl. Hundreds of men are on the river and, at night, the town resembles a western mining camp. Prosperity is at the top notch in Maunie. Everybody has money. Pearls have been sold for between \$25 and \$895. And crops are standing in the fields.
- March 1905: Musseling has resumed at Grayville, and the river is falling. But there are not expected to be many men digging this year, as the shell trust is offering little for shells.

(Source: "The Backward Book," by Barry Cleveland)



Above: Punched shells and tools
Right: More tools of the trade



SECOND GRADE TEAS & TOURS

by: Ranelle Hubele

White County Historical Society hosted tours of the Robinson Stewart House and yard on April 24-27 for each Second-Grade classroom in White County. Following the tour, the students and their teachers were seated in the parlor at small tables decorated with flowers provided by Steins. Each table was hosted by a Historical Society member or another volunteer to listen to an explanation on the history of tea, a review of correct manners, and to enjoy hot tea and snacks. A major highlight on the snack tray is Brownie Bites—brownies baked in miniature muffin pans and decorated by Judy Cutchin! The children are always interested in the novelty of the sugar cubes and small sandwiches with no bread crusts. The event was coordinated by the committee of Paula Pierson, Diane Jordan, Mary Ann Bax, Barbara Kearney, and Ranelle Hubele.



Barbara Marks is telling 2nd grade students about herbs growing in the backyard garden at Robinson-Stewart House. The herb and flower garden is similar to one viewed in 100 year old snapshots discovered in the house.

Tours were conducted by Barbara Marks, Kristin Land, Camden Stewart, David Brown, and Ranelle Hubele. Stories and explanations were provided by Mary Ann Bax, Stephanie Dennis, Connie Kisner, and Brenda Questell. The very important table host positions during the week were filled by 25 different persons. During the 4 days of tea parties, the 5 or 6 tables in the parlor needed a host or hostess 45 times! The volunteers (some of whom served more than once) included: Betty Gholson, Judy Peyton, Jan Prince, Bev Walker, Gene Jordan, Linda Williams, Dee Maurer, Debbie Bunting, Winnie Rector, Ruth Sneed, Karen Ray, Karen Lewis, Joyce Edwards, Kay Winter, Connie Saunders, Julia Grant, Paula Bohleber, Sharon Roberts, Nancy Armstrong, Suellen Smith, Jaunita Harris, Trish Pringle, Karen Johnson, Holly Healy, and Judy Williams. Extra helpers assisting Diane Jordan and Paula Pierson in the kitchen included Loretta Vangampller, Marjorie Brown, and Sasha Jordan.

SECOND GRADE TEAS & TOURS (CONTINUED)

Board members and their family helpers cleaned the house and yard prior to the event, set up the tables and chairs in the parlor, and returned the parlor furnishings at the end of the week. Our calculation is that 45 volunteers gave 306 hours for this effort. We sincerely apologize if the name of any volunteer was omitted. This popular activity has been held every year since 2004 when it was initiated by then Board Member Marjorie Fechtig. ✍



Barbara Marks and Kristin Land welcome 2nd grade students to the oldest house in Carmi and White County. John Crow built the original 2 room log house in 1814.



Kristin Land telling students about the stove and other items in the kitchen.

SECOND GRADE TEAS & TOURS (CONTINUED)



Paula Bohleber served as a hostess during the tea party.



Suellen Smith hosting a group of 2nd graders.

ROBINSON STEWART HOUSE PLANT SALE

by: Barbara Kearney

Dozens of eager gardeners showed up to catch some bargains at the 5th annual Plant Sale, hosted by the White County Historical Society on Saturday, May 6th. Tea and cookies were served, as shoppers relaxed in the gardens of Carmi's oldest house, the Robinson-Stewart House, where the sale was held. A huge variety of plants had been donated, including tulips, hostas, lillies, iris, passion flowers, blackberry shoots, herbs, and many more. Winners of the drawing for the beautiful floral baskets donated by Hargrave Mums and More, and Keller's Landscaping were won by Don Duvall, Linda Hendricks, and Sheila Savage. The Society thanks all who donated plants, cookies, and time to make the sale a success. ✍



ESTATE GIFTS - SIMPLER THAN YOU THINK

If you would really like to help the White County Historical Society but are not inclined to do so during your lifetime, you may be pleased to know that there are some simple ways to make a gift to the Society through your estate. Following are a few of the simplest and most popular ways to do so.

1. Simply instruct your attorney to name the White County Historical Society as a beneficiary in your will or trust using the language below.
2. List the White County Historical Society as a beneficiary of an insurance policy, retirement account or tax-deferred annuity. Simply request a “change of beneficiary form” and use the language below to fill it out.
3. Fill out a Transfer of Death (TOD) form where you hold your investments using the language below.
4. Request a Totten Trust form from your bank and list the White County Historical Society as a beneficiary of your account(s), once again using the language below.

“_____to the White County Historical Society to be used in the ongoing stewardship of its buildings and grounds, the conservation of its artifacts and the continuation of its educational programs.”

GENEALOGY QUERY

If you have a query, please send it to the Mary Smith Fay Genealogy Library and we can add it to the next newsletter.

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

We know that many of you have stories about a historical event of White County. We would welcome having your story to include in future editions of the White County Historian. Write your story, include your name, and mail it to Mary Smith Fay Genealogical Library at P.O. Box 121, Carmi, IL or email to rshous@gmail.com. Then watch for it in future editions of the newsletter.

MISSION STATEMENT

To preserve and promote the historical interest of White County through our stewardship of its artifacts and the historic sites and education programs and exhibits that we provide for its people

VISION STATEMENT

To make the history of White County come alive for the people of White County

MUSEUMS



Ratcliff Inn
218 E. Main Street



The L. Haas Museum
219 E. Main Street



Robinson-Stewart House
111- S. Main Cross Street



Matsel Cabin
East Robinson Street

Our museums, located in Carmi, Illinois, are open on advertised dates or by appointment only:

CONTACT INFORMATION

- ✉ Mailing Address: White County Historical Society
Mary Smith Fay Genealogy Library
PO Box 121
203 North Church Street
Carmi, Illinois 62821-0121
- ✉ Email: rshous@gmail.com
- ✉ To make an appointment to visit our museums, contact the librarian at the Mary Smith Fay Genealogy Library: call 618-382-8425 or email w.c.h.s-genealogy@hotmail.com
- ✉ If you have an item you are interested in donating to the society, contact Suellen Smith at 618-384-5672
- ✉ Comments, suggestions or contributions for the newsletter can be mailed to the address above or to rshous@gmail.com. Please include "newsletter" in the subject line.

AFFILIATIONS

The Society maintains memberships in the following:
 Southern Illinois Association of Museums (SIAM)
 Illinois Association of Museums (IAM)
 American Association of State and Local History (AASLH)
 Illinois Historic Preservation
 Carmi Chamber of Commerce

MEMBERS OF THE 2017 BOARD:

President – David Brown	Marjorie Brown
Vice President - Paula Pierson	Cindy Birk Conley
Secretary – Ranelle Hubele	Kathy Fridley
Treasurer – Jeff Bohleber	Lecta Hortin
Valarie Berekashvili	Barbara Kearney
Brock Bolerjack	Past President - Gene Jordan