

**The Quarterly Bulletin of the**  
 Ripley County, Indiana, Historical Society, Inc.  
 Library – 125 Washington Street  
 Museum – Corner of Main and Water Streets  
 Versailles, Indiana 47042

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**VOLUME XXXI**

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**NUMBER 3**

▲ The Ripley Co. Historical Society will meet Sunday July 11, at 2:00 at the Archive Library on the west side of Versailles Courthouse Square. The program for our next meeting is by Bob Kelly whom wrote the book “Broken Wings”. Refreshments will be provided by Shelby Twp.

▲ Research \$5.00 for non-members, and \$.50 per page copied.

▲ The WWII War Veterans book, titled **LEST WE FORGET**, is still available. It can be obtained for \$35 at (1) Batesville Historical Society which is located on George Street next to the Post Office (during its open hours), (2) the Osgood Museum on South Buckeye Street (on Friday or Saturday afternoons) or in Versailles at the Ripley County Historical Society Library on the west side of the Courthouse Square (open every weekday afternoon from 1 to 4). Also, **LEST WE FORGET** can be ordered for shipment by mail for \$40. Checks should be made payable to Ripley County Historical Society. We give our heartfelt thanks to Joan and Norris Krall.

▲ Members that are willing to receive the newsletter via email instead of postal mailing can do so by emailing RCHS with your request along with your email address. The email for sending your request is printed above.

▲ RCHS extends a big **Thank You** to Norris Krall for his program on May 21 on the CCC Camp at the State Park. He said that the men in the CCC Camp were paid \$20.00 and they sent \$15.00 home to their families. The CCC Statue in the Versailles State Park is the first one in Indiana.

▲ RCHS needs to replace the windows in the library. If you wish to donate \$250.00 for a window in your name, a memorial, or in honor of a loved one, send your donation and request to RCHS on the address below. A plaque will be made with the honored names inscribed.

The RCHS Archives Library is open for public research weekdays 1 – 4 pm, except holidays, Pumpkin Show week (Sept.), also the week before and between Christmas and New Years. The Library will also be closed during inclement weather. The Museum summer hours are Sundays 2 – 4 pm, June 6 through August and on Saturday September 26<sup>th</sup> during the Pumpkin Show. Questions call 812-689-3031

**Mail your renewal for 2010 to RCHS at P.O. Box 525, Versailles, IN 47042**

Dues: Annual \$10; Life \$100.

**THE FOLLOWING BOOKS ARE AVAILABLE:**

<i>Ripley County History, Volume 1</i>	\$65	<i>Versailles, IN School Life 1818-1966</i>	\$ 20
<i>Brown Twp. Tales</i> by Alan Smith	20	<i>Osgood, IN Sesquicentennial 1856-2006</i>	17
<i>Tales of Versailles</i> by Alan Smith	16	<i>Come Visit</i> by Jean McClellan	25
<i>Vintage Postcards</i> by Alan Smith	20	<i>Jackson Township Cemetery Index</i>	13
<i>Brown Township Cemetery Index</i>	10	<i>Johnson Township Cemetery Index</i>	10
<i>Milan, Indiana, A Storied Past</i>	16	<i>Lest We Forget WWII</i>	35
<i>Broken Wings</i> , By Robert Kelly	20		
Shipping Charges added for all books	5		

## RIPLEY COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY MINUTES April 11, 2010

The spring quarterly meeting of the Society was called to order by President Cheryl Welch on April 11, 2010. Cheryl led the attendees in the Pledge of Allegiance. Each of the 24 attendees identified themselves by name and township of residence.

Secretary Frank Keenan read the minutes of the winter quarterly meeting of April 2010, which were approved as read. Treasurer Owen Menchhofer reported the Society's current finances which were also approved as read.

President Welch advised the membership that a sorely needed microfilm reader was recently purchased by the Society for \$5500.00.

President Cheryl Welch announced that the Director for Laughery Twp, Helen Decker; Director for Delaware Twp, Lois Workman; and Director for Franklin Twp, Esther Edmondson, agreed to serve another term as their respective Township Director.

Cheryl Welch announced that the Society acquired a map portraying all of the Native American Tribes who inhabited Indiana prior to the European settlement; also acquired a souvenir piece of the famous Hanging Tree, gifted by the family of Hezechiah Hughes. Thank you so much for the wonderful gifts.

Cheryl Welch announced the Museum's summer "open" hours schedule which are stated on the front page of this newsletter. President Welch asked for volunteers to staff the Smith-Engel Log Cabin on the grounds of the Museum during the Pumpkin Show, which will be further discussed during the summer meeting. The Pumpkin Show runs from September 22 to September 23, 2010.

Following the business meeting, the program, "The History of Ripley County" was presented by Marita Hooten Cizak. Ms. Cizak arrived in Civil War Era attire, which had been passed down in the Hooten family. Marita regaled us with detailed accounts of Ripley County's early settlement and development. She told how the various communities got their name and tales of the County's more colorful and/or courageous characters, such as Stephen Harding whom fought for anti-slavery; Revolutionary War Colonel Laughery; George Rogers Clark; Meriwether Lewis Expedition; and bootlegger Flo Peggy Skeen, who made hoods for some of the Hanging Tree Lynchers.

Marita noted that Versailles was founded in 1820, four years after statehood. A Frenchman offered County government 100 acres for a County seat, provided he named the town "Versailles", the site of the royal palace of the Bourbon Kings of France. County Government took him up on his offer. Cross Plains takes its name from the fact that a church was built at the crossroads of two roads on the plains. Holton got its name from Mr. Holman who founded a saw mill in the area. The name was originally "Hotown" which over time became Holton. Sunman was named after Tom Sunman, an Englishman who built a log cabin and settled in that area in 1855.

Respectfully submitted by  
Frank Keenan  
Recording Secretary

## **SOME RIPLEY COUNTY HISTORICAL GLEANINGS**

### **SHORT STORIES AS TOLD BY ALAN SMITH IN HIS BOOK "TALES OF VERSAILLES"**

#### **Florence Skeen**

Florence Skeen, known in the community of Versailles as Flo Peggy. Views differed, so it is left up to the reader how she should be judged.

Florence was called a "witch" by some because of her style of dress when she was of older age. She was convicted as an abortionist in her late years, but she always claimed that she was a friend to "those in need".

Her father was Calvin Skeen, who ran the Hassmer House, and was a prominent man in Versailles. Flo's brother shot himself at the Hassmer House when he was 20 years old.

For many years Florence operated a saloon in a small green house on lot #72 on the southwest corner of Main Cross (now Tyson Street) and Washington Streets. While she ran this saloon, Florence had a pet parrot named Polly. Polly was very popular with the town children and customers. Polly was trained to say some appropriate and not so appropriate phrases, but was enjoyed by most customers.

Florence was a talented seamstress and made hats and clothes for many of her friends.

Upon her death, she specified that she not be buried below ground. According to her wishes, she was buried in an above ground stone tomb in Cliff Hill Cemetery.

#### **Versailles' First Hanging**

The first and only legal hanging is written as follows:

A Wm. Maddox in Decatur County drank a pint of tea which contained white arsenic. The arsenic had been purchased by John D. Bennett. Maddox died three days later, and the theory was that Bennett was the murderer. Bennett though, swore that Maddox had asked him to go buy the arsenic in order to kill a big rat. Bennett, a laborer, was thought to be friendly with Mrs. Maddox, and people in the area thought him guilty.

A change of venue brought the case to Ripley County. Judge Wm. M. McCarty along with the selected jurors found Bennett guilty and sentenced him to hang.

On Friday, December 5, 1851, between the hours of 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. the star of the performance who had ridden upon his own casket to a spot in a hollow at the east end of Water Street mounted the scaffold before a very large crowd. Bennett maintained until the last that he was innocent, and Sheriff John Stewart, believing him, refused to spring the trap.

A volunteer from the crowd was the executioner and justice or injustice was done. Tradition has it that Mrs. Maddox, on her death bed, exonerated poor Bennett. Thus, ended the story of the first hanging in Versailles.

## **Counterfeiters**

On November 4, 1869, the Versailles Advocate printed the news that Lyle Levi (of the famous Versailles Hanging story) and his sister Missouri Rittenhouse were arrested on a charge of counterfeiting. Missouri waived examination and was released on \$3,000.00 bail. Lyle was committed to jail in default of \$6,000.00 bail.

A man named Patterson who lived with the Levis notified the Treasury Department saying that the Levis were uttering spurious money. A detective named Clark posed as a horse trader and after gaining their confidence purchased phony money from the Levis. The bills were \$50.00 postal money. Isaac Levi was to deliver \$2,000.00 in larger bills and Mrs. Rittenhouse became involved in this deal. Missouri's husband made the original plates and \$12,000.00 in 5, 10 and 20 dollar bills were confiscated.

It was said that the bills were of high quality and would pass almost anywhere.

## **Death of the old town lamplighter**

September 5, 1900, Versailles lost one of its many colorful characters. His name was William (Billy) Loesnich.

Billy was an old Prussian War veteran who was also in the Civil War. He was a short man, very erect, and loved to regale himself in his uniform, and with his saber and old bugle do the manual of arms. For many years he acted as the town crier calling out that all was well. He was also the town lamp lighter for some years. The lamp lighter's duties were to trim the lamp's wicks and refuel the lamps on the town square.

Loesnich was a talented photographer and had a studio on the east side of Main Street. It was said that when Billy was an old man he would sometimes take a bath at a well in the side yard.

On September 5, 1900, Loesnich had an altercation with John Johnson and was fined \$5.00 by the town squire. Billy was involved in another squabble that was to come before the squire and said that if he was found guilty again he would shoot himself. Billy became extremely agitated over the squire's decision and went home, put on his uniform, collected his saber and bugle, and loaded his old revolver. On his way to the cemetery he said good-bye to Mrs. Johnson.

Mrs. Johnson sent her young son to town to get help, but no one would believe the boy. By the time two boys caught sight of Billy he had knelt upon his wife's grave and shot himself in the head. Their headstone is near the cliff at "Gordon's Leap".

Harry, Roscoe, and Daniel Johnson ran to the cemetery and saw Billy take off his cap, place it on the grave of his wife, put his .44 revolver to his head and fire.

B. F. Spencer conducted Billy's burial, and a salute fired while a bugle sounded "lights out".

# County, Indiana, Historical

Ripley



Society

## OFFICERS and DIRECTORS

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