

WASHINGTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY

HERITAGE HERALD

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From your president Joyce A. Nordhielm:

Hear Ye Hear Ye

January Meeting
January 24, 2005
7:00 p.m. Presbyterian Church

Our January meeting is entitled “I’ve Got a Story.” People from the community who have “memories” will share. This program has been our most popular program. Join the fun!

Time Travels in Trunks

The Historical Society, in conjunction with the Public Library, has organized a program to interest school children in the past. The Time Travelers will present programs on different subjects as historical artifacts are displayed to pique the children’s interest. If you are interested in being a part of that program, call Mary Kerr at 444 4526.

Monthly Public Meetings

Following is a schedule of monthly public meetings for the remainder of the year. January 24th is “I’ve Got a Story”; February is History of Holt, Best and Early Caterpillar by Nicole Thaxton; March 28th is Historical Moments in Time with Photo Restoration by Becky Dailey; April 25 is Architectural History of the Washington Square by Zachary Borders. Our meetings are free and open to the public. We meet at the Presbyterian Church at 7: 00 p.m. except for the April Meeting which includes a dinner and meeting. This special event is held at the First United Methodist Church at 1420 N. Main. Tickets will be available at the March meeting.

From your editor—Kit A. Zinser:

My focus for the January newsletter was how kids in the 20’s and 30’s entertained themselves. Today, the focus seems to be on television, the computer, video games or movies. The technology is just there waiting for them to make a decision on the next surreal activity! While I am a firm believer in technological evolution, I can’t discount the role imagination and creativity played in children’s lives for so many years. First, I became intrigued with the calling cards in the miniature silver compote in my front hall. The cards are years old and bear the names of: James Walker Danforth, Jean Jordan, Helen Hett, John Kern, James Leslie Hinthorn, William Risser, John

Dale Wright, Florence E. Ekena, Arden Grenzenbach, Wilma Schmalz, Emerson Ebert, Robert Bradle, Claude Esch, Orvetta Fern Imhoff, Wayne Vercler, Gladys Muller, Mary Mosley, and Nell Briley. I suspect friends were the focus of entertainment and the more you could harbor, the more games you could play. There probably wasn't a field around town that didn't play host to baseball, kick the can, blind man's bluff, red rover, red rover, hide and seek or even a high school football game!

As Martha (Clem) Baer and I were tooling around town one afternoon, we drove past the Danforth house on South Main. Mr. Danforth was a lumberman and the interior of the home reflected his love of good wood. The house next door was built for George Danforth, Walker and Carol Danforth's father. After being educated at the Naval Academy, Walker was lost at sea during the second World War off the coast of Nova Scotia. Across the street from the old Heiple house which stood empty for years (one of the purported "haunted" houses dubbed by teens in town) was the football field and before the game could be played, the students had to come out and clear the field of cow dung. Talk about school spirit! While she reminisced, Clem mentioned a typical teen activity—creative mischief. She and a few friends released a gaggle of geese from a field (right where the new Essig home now sits) one October evening, herding the noisy critters about town only to be foiled by the lone policeman who popped out and stated: "If you girls get those geese home now, I won't arrest you." The geese were back in the field within minutes. I wonder if Mrs. Land, Mrs. Kern, Mrs. Dickinson or Mrs. Clemens ever found out? Jim Smith's field on Adams was a gathering place for many kids and creativity was a must as the game of baseball was played while cows were in the same field and some of those guys like Jim and Joe Broz and the Berlett brothers were great hitters! I watched pretty much from the sidelines stepping in only as someone had to go home to eat dinner. My good fortune!

Little did I realize at six years of age, playing Dale Evans to Kent Gerber's Roy Rogers would I develop a friendship with his aunt, Betty Blumenshine Gerber. She shared her amazing repertoire of town events and kids just having fun! Betty and I stepped back into the 30's and 40's for a few hours one cloudy, cold morning at Katie's cafe. When we finished, I wished that we could pack a lunch, saddle the ponies and ride until we were bowlegged!

Betty was born August 1925 to Helen and Lester who farmed two miles South and 1/4 mile East of Washington on Irish Lane. She attended her first four grades at Cooper Station School where Mrs. Ethel Evans held students in check. Cooper was the largest country school in the county with all eight grades in one room. Mrs. Evans stoked the fire early in the morning and each student had his or her own drinking cup for fresh well water. Betty still has hers! Potluck dinners and monthly programs infused the families with community spirit. In the fifth grade, her parents paid tuition so she could attend school in town. Each day after school when the weather was not cooperating, Betty would bounce into the house and plop in front of the radio to listen to Orphan Annie or Tom Mix on the radio. After chores and dinner, her parents would settle in with a book or the newspaper and tune into shows like Charlie McCarthy, The Inner Sanctum and Lux Radio Theatre. On Sundays, there was church and visiting and entertaining at home. Her mother was a great cook and loved company. Upon her death, Betty had to part with at least eight sets of china attesting to her mother's joy of entertaining. The opportunity to eat out was not often, but when they did, it was Marshall's for their tasty ribs or Christ's Café under the city building for hearty sandwiches and great pie! A bubbly personality with a daring spirit, Betty had many friends. Thanks to the generosity of Heyl Pony Farm, each responsible child had a pony to ride. Her dad and uncle helped

break ponies for Heyl. Betty and Shirley Norris Pudik would pack a lunch, saddle up and ride for the whole Saturday. In the winter, her dad would tie sleds to the bumper of the old car and pull the kids around the snow covered mud back roads. South Main was also used for coasting and the Tazewell Reporter stated: “Saturday January 13 was a perfect day made to order for kids with a sled. The snow had melted enough to be like ice. South Main was a busy place with all the kids coasting!” Often times, Lester would drop a circle of friends off for the day at Glen Oak park for ice skating. A cup of cocoa and hot dog would complete the event.

Her parents promoted education and culture. Betty felt fortunate to attend the 1933 Chicago World’s Fair, along with plays and concerts with her mother. Betty spent many summers at Sullivan’s Field since her dad coached the girls’ softball team—Peg Dickinson and Speed Birkett were two players she fondly recalled. The uniforms were striped t-shirts and white slacks! Baseball and more baseball and certainly the band concerts extended ample opportunity for socializing. It seems as if the City Building was the place to be and often her father would play the accordion for shows and plays held there. Ballet and tap lessons were offered at the city building. Once in a while, she and Virginia Kimpling would head over to the Palace Theatre in Peoria for Saturday Vaudeville shows and hang out at the stage door for autographs. Betty chuckles as she remembers the autograph from Lawrence Welk in 1941. The Tazewell Theatre provided another avenue for entertainment and she loved movies as much as her mother. *Gone With the Wind* premiered in Atlanta that year and as a Valentine’s gift her mother took her to see the movie at the Palace in Peoria in February paying an exorbitant \$5.00 per ticket. Lester wasn’t as impressed as Betty and her mother were. Her senior year in high school was sparsely populated (many of the boys enlisted and went to war), but Betty was a band member and played a lot of golf. (Still is an avid golfer). After graduating from Bradley University, she went to work for a savings and loan company where she became the first female officer of the institution. While at Bradley, she was a member of Sigma Kappa sorority in 1947 when they went national. A few years ago, she found her sorority pin from that year. Being a quintessential promoter of the past, Betty took her pin to the sorority at Bradley and asked that it be given to the top senior of the year. Appreciating Betty’s gesture, the president of the sorority went one step further. The top senior of the year could wear it for one year and pass it on to next year’s recipient. Betty is an honorable and open woman. She lost the love of her life



The center of Washington’s universe—the city building!

(Jake Gerber) a few years ago, but she is still a vibrant member of our community—one who is willing to share her memories and mementoes. We talked about the city building and how it was the center of activity for the town with plays, concerts, recitals. She mused about why it was torn down and who felt it was necessary to tear it down. After all, we “put up a parking lot” in its stead. Bless those who maintain and restore the magnificent buildings and homes in Washington.

Another haven for kids for many years was the Cummings farm where you could hike, swim, ride, take lessons and hang out with the most knowledgeable horse woman ever (if you could keep up with her!). Several years have passed since you read about Ella Wren Cummings. but I was fortunate enough to spend an evening in December at the farm. I stepped into the warm brick house and shadows danced on the walls from the kerosene lamps. A fire glimmered in one end of the parlor and a huge lavishly decorated Frazier Fir stood in the front of the other fireplace. The dining room table was laden with sweets of all kinds and egg nog and tea were poured. Ella's furnishings are such beautiful antiques; used and loved by friends and family but amazingly looking as if the Pfeiffer's just had them delivered. I spied Ella sitting in a plush wingback chair—A pert, diminutive woman who possesses an ageless and unique sense of spirit and mettle and courage. Her trademark pageboy is no longer raven, but silver. Not having seen her for a while, I still have her pictured in jodhpurs and knee high riding boots. Her walk is just a bit slower, but no less determined. The adjectives honorable and wise apply as she speaks. I asked about the Steeplechase held at the farm many years ago. As a child, I remember the warm Sunday where locals and dignitaries mixed and were awed by the exquisite thoroughbreds trained for this type of race as one of Ella's trained thoroughbreds competed. She and her husband Dave became interested in steeplechase with friends from Tennessee and Kentucky. Her passion for horses and commitment to the sport brought this opportunity to Washington and the event was special indeed. The conversation never lagged and I was caught up in her enthusiasm and with Ella, you just walk into the memory. Later, her daughter Joan Cummings Knott and I talked about having a slumber party in the barn—just to hear the horses nicker and chomp hay during the night. Ella agreed it was a soothing sound since the horses spend much of their time enjoying their food. A few years ago, one of her horses was injured and had to have a dressing tended throughout the night. The vet offered to come out after midnight and change the dressing. Ella and her granddaughter instead slept in the barn making sure the horse received the loving attention he needed. Ella and Joan also spoke of the many snakes which are a normal part of farm and barn life. Ella recollected a time when she and a young boy were in the barn, and he spied a snake slithering up the wall to the rafters above. His fear was that a snake might fall on top of Ella (or himself) as they were unsaddling or feeding the horses. She assured him snakes are very secure and that wouldn't happen. Later, as she stood in front of the watering trough, a rather large reptile made a huge splash as it "lost its footing" on the overhead beam. Her only thought was "You big liar, Ella!" Our laughs continued into the evening and it was hard to tear myself away. A tribute to Ella and her husband Dave is that the family (Patricia, Susie, Joan, Chuck, and John) maintain one of the most loving and enjoyable relationships I have ever had the pleasure to witness.

I stepped outside where the frozen ground was so hard that it almost hurt to walk and thought of all the dawns Ella made her way to the barn to feed, water and curry the horses; how she went back to the house to fix meals and then out to the barn again at night for more chores. But it was obviously a labor of love. The farm is an exquisite place full of memories and history. The night was hushed.. I inhaled the sharp, cold air; gazed into the heavens where the moon looked like a pearl dropped into indigo velvet. I then thought about Ella and Dave's son, Tony Cummings and found my faith in guardian angels reaffirmed.

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Cast members from one of the plays put on in the city building. The production was: “Only an Orphan Girl” a soul stirring drama of human trials and tribulations. It was suggested in the playbook that fake mustaches be sold so the audience could get into the spirit and that peanuts in the shell be sold not so much as to be eaten but to throw at the actors. (that didn’t happen because no one wanted to sweep up) Also, audience members were advised to HISS very loudly when the villain (Arthur Rutherford, aka Clyde Nutty) appeared on stage—that did happen!

From left to right—Martha Jackson (Ethel Rutherford, fair stranger), Don Holzman (Swem Perkins, Dick’s father), Lois Sampson (Lucy, a ray of sunshine), Clyde Nutty (Arthur Rutherford, from the city), Martha Baer, (Nellie, the orphan girl), Ron Marshall (Dick Perkins, a clean cut farm lad), Lynn Doremus (Mrs. Perkins, mother of Dick); Miriam Grimm (Widow Appleby, A neighbor). The only way I was able to figure out Mirm’s part was a line I saw in the booklet and remembered her declaring as only she could do: “Well, I swan! Never did like city fellers no how!” as Arthur met his demise.



Ahhh....Washington!