

Mercer County Historical Society Newsletter

"Preserving Mercer County History"

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Mercer County Historical Society

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Essley-Noble Museum

1406 - SE 2nd Avenue

Aledo, IL 61231

Phone: 309/582-2280

Hours

April – Oct: Wed, Sat, Sun 1-5:00pm

Nov - March: Saturdays 12:00-4:00pm

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For Genealogy Queries write to:

MCHS Genealogy Dept.

PO Box 269

Aledo IL 61231-2504

Or: email the museum

✎

**Memberships available for \$20/household or \$300
for a lifetime membership**

*For correspondence, membership or change of
address contact:*

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Essley-Noble Museum

Box 269

Aledo, IL 61231

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Website: www.mchsil.org

Email: mcmuseum@frontier.com

Find us on Facebook

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Confirmed: She WAS the President's Daughter

By - Stephanie Braucht

Sometimes historical truths reveal themselves gradually, often over long periods of time, aided by scientific and technological advances. Such has been the case with the mystery surrounding Elizabeth Ann Blaesing, who allegedly was the out-of-wedlock daughter of President Warren G. Harding. A previous edition of this newsletter (Winter 2011) recounted the story of little Elizabeth, and her connection to Mercer County, according to the facts known at that time. Since then, more information has surfaced, and we now can say with certainty that the daughter of a US President visited Mercer County on more than one occasion.



Elizabeth Ann was born on October 22, 1919, to single mother Nan Britton. In a book Nan published in 1927, after the sudden death of President Harding (which had occurred in 1923), she claimed publicly that he was the father of Elizabeth Ann. Reportedly their relationship began when he was a US Senator from Ohio. That information was kept secret even as he ran for and was elected to the presidency in 1921. Harding was married all this time to Florence Kling DeWolfe. She had a son from a previous marriage, but she and Harding had no children together. Nan claimed that he privately acknowledged paternity of Elizabeth Ann and sent them money from time to time. Due to the need for secrecy, and because of social attitudes of the times, Nan arranged for her sister, also named Elizabeth, and Elizabeth's husband, Scott Willits, to take responsibility for Elizabeth Ann and to raise her as if she were their own. When Harding died, he left no provision for Elizabeth Ann, and still had not publicly acknowledged her as his daughter. When Nan reached out to his siblings for help, she met with resistance and denials. In an attempt to establish support for Elizabeth Ann, she published the book entitled *The President's Daughter* in 1927, in which she told the story. The Harding family remained uncooperative. During the years that Elizabeth Ann lived with Scott and Elizabeth Willits, she visited Mercer County several times. Scott Willits had been born and raised in Mercer County, living first with his parents in New Boston Township. His parents were Allison and Rose Rader Willits. By 1930 they had moved to Keithsburg and Scott was a talented violinist and teacher at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago. Even though the 1930 census appears to show Allison and Rose living on Fourth Street in the town of Keithsburg, it has become apparent that this would have been the same place they were living as of the *1935 Official*

Directory of Mercer County, in Section 22 of Keithsburg Township. A study of plat maps shows that this is land owned by the family of Dwight and Imogene Welch, just north of Pope Creek along the "hard road" running north out of town. In 1930 and 1935, the city limits extended out that far, so the home there truly would have been "in" Keithsburg. In *The President's Daughter*. Nan mentions Elizabeth Ann having gone with Scott and Elizabeth to visit his parents on their farm in Illinois. Nolan Hurt, writing for the *Rock Island Argus* of July 21, 1964, wrote that the mayor of Keithsburg at that time, Mac Dale Brown, well remembered childhood visits from Elizabeth to the Willits family.

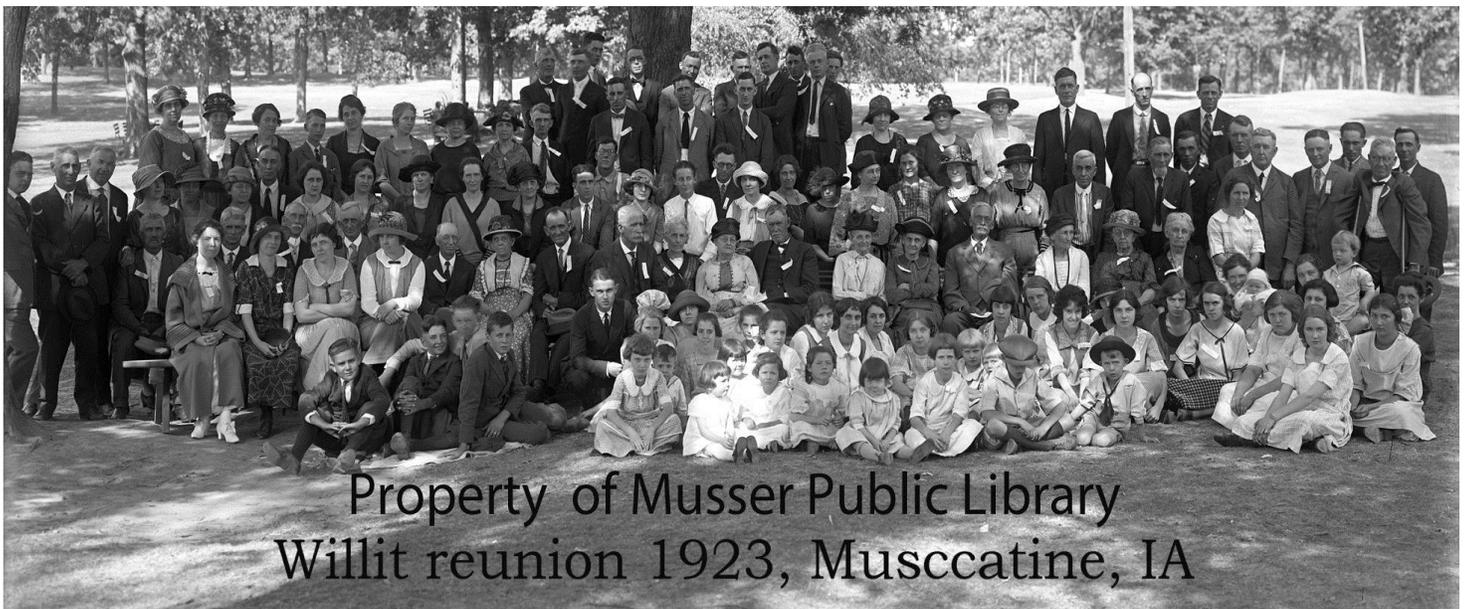
Just this past August, 2015, word was released by the *New York Times* (online August 12 and in print August 13) that DNA tests have been conducted and the results confirm that Elizabeth Ann was, in fact, the daughter of Warren G. Harding, 29th President of the United States. A grandnephew and grandniece of Harding cooperated and submitted DNA samples, as did at least one of Elizabeth Ann's sons. And it was a match, showing the correct degree of relatedness of those individuals!

About a year ago, Melisse Trentz discovered a photo of a Willits family reunion from 1923. In an effort to identify people in the photo, Jean Wistedt found an article about the reunion in the *Times Record* of August 30, 1923. The article verifies that Elizabeth Ann was present with Scott and Elizabeth Willits at that reunion. The following two paragraphs are from that article (with apologies for some words or letters which were unreadable on the microfilm):

The Willits reunion this year [1923] was held in Weed Park, Muscatine, August 23, and a permanent organization was formed to meet the third Thursday in August of each year. The 1924 picnic will be held in Sunset Park, Washington, Iowa. T.E. Willits, of Mt. Pleasant, Ia., was elected president; Bob Willits, of Joy, vice president; Mrs. Lawrence Willits, New Boston, treasurer; Ruth Willits of Joy, secretary.

The following were present:

Dr. ??? of ???; Mr. and Mrs. Al Willits, Keithsburg, **Mr. and Mrs. Scott Willits and daughter**, Keithsburg; Francis Shingledecker, Virginia Kiddoo, Joy; F.B. Bloomer, Keithsburg; Mr. and Mrs. Geo. Lutz, Mrs. Lew Reed and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Robinson and daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Morrow and family, Joy; Ed and Ruth Stevens, Ella and Eddie Imber, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Ives, Mr. and Mrs. Fred Beard, New Boston; Mrs. Dolf [Dolph] Willits, Mr. and Mrs. Clair Willits, Mr. and Mrs. Norian Willits and family, Mr. and Mrs. Tom Willits, Aledo; Bert Willits, Mr. and Mrs. Glen Willits, Stella Willits, Bob Willits, Daus, Ress, and Roberta, Fritz Minic, Washington, IA; Miss Helen Hendrix, Gerald Hendrix, Wilmot Hendrix, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Hendrix, Mr. and Mrs. Ed Willits, Mary, Ruth, Dale, and Margarite, Mrs. Jas. Brockway and children, Mrs. Ti[?]llie Litts[?], Letts, Ia.; Mr. and Mrs. John Willits, Farmington, IA.; Mr. and Mrs. ?? Willits, Robert Willits, Ruth Willits, Mt. Pleasant, IA.; Miss Florene Brookheart, Letts; Roger E. Willits, Mr. and Mrs. John Willits, Gregory Landing, Mo.; ??? Stout[?], Maxwell[?], Kan.; S.H. Prentiss, New Boston; Mr. and Mrs. Harry Willits, Keithsburg; Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Willits, Mabel and Frank, Mr. and Mrs. Courtney Willits, Novella, Sarah, Wilma, Maxine, and Geneva,



Mr. and Mrs. B. ? Willits, Mr. and Mrs. W.A. Willits, Fred Willits, Mrs. Eck Willits, Mr. and Mrs. Marsh Honeyman, Mr. and Mrs. Joe Stineman, New Boston; Ruth Willits, Mrs. Rebecca Willits, Omer Willits and sons, Mr. and Mrs. Bob Willits and Mary Louise, Mr. and Mrs. Clair Braucht and family, Mr. and Mrs. Chas. Crapnell and family, Joy; Miss Elsie Wilson, Kearney, Neb.; Mr. and Mrs. Thos. Long and family, Mr. and Mrs. Chas. Kurhat[?] (Kuphat?), Kewanee; Mr. and Mrs. R.N. Noble, Rachel Noble, Mr. and Mrs. Warren Noble, Dr. Fred Munn, Mrs. Jennie Hartwig and son, Mr. and Mrs. Frank Livingston and family, Miss Tillie Kath, Mrs. Hattie Prouty, New Boston.

An interesting side note is that President Warren G. Harding had died just three weeks prior to when this picture was taken.

A copy of the Willits reunion photo accompanies this article. Elizabeth Ann is the little girl in the white dress almost exactly in the middle of the front row, sitting on the ground. Scott Willits is the man standing at the far left of the picture, almost hidden by a tree. Only a few of the other individuals in this picture have been identified. If you can identify any others of those listed as being in attendance, we would be most happy to have you tell us.

The original of this photo, which is from the Oscar Grossheim Collection, is under copyright to the Musser Public Library in Muscatine, IA. They have graciously given us permission to display a copy at our museum, which is available for you to see, and to use it in this article. No one else may use this photograph in any way. If you would like a copy of the photograph, contact the Musser Public Library, 304 Iowa Ave., Muscatine, IA 52761, phone 563-263-3065, e-mail refmus@muscatineiowa.gov

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**Our Museum on
National Geographic Website**

We are excited to announce that our Essley-Noble Museum has been accepted for inclusion on a new *National Geographic* website about tourism along the Mississippi River! According to the website, "The Mississippi River Geotourism Program seeks to capture and promote the culture, heritage, and ecological diversity of the people and places that are connected to the Mississippi River through the voices and stories of the people that live along its

shores." The Essley-Noble Museum was nominated and is one of the "Places to Go."

The project covers both sides of the entire length of the river. To see the website, go to www.mississippiriver.natgeotourism.com/ Once there, click on "Places to Go." Then click on "Museum, Theatre, Interpretive Center." Finally scroll until you find the thumbnail for the Essley-Noble Museum and click on it. (Thanks to Stephanie Braucht for bringing the museum to the website's attention.)

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**Annual Open Meeting –
"He Still Belongs to the Ages"**

Mark Monday **Oct. 19** on your calendar and join us for the Annual Open Meeting at 7:00 p.m. at the Essley Noble Museum. Our program will be presented by Michael Zecher who will talk about the 2015 Lincoln funeral reenactment. His presentation will be a slide show of photos that he took along with some period photos to show the comparison. He will have some historical items from his personal collection, as well.

The meeting is free and open to the public. Refreshments will be served and you will have an opportunity afterwards to ask questions, chat, and visit the museum's exhibits.

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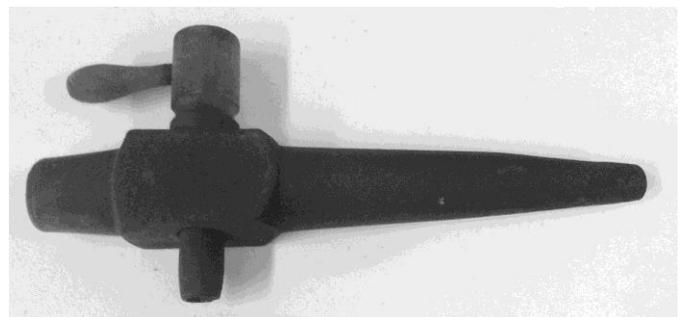
New Board Members

Welcome to our newest members of the MCHS board of directors. Hugh Brown of Aledo has agreed to be our treasurer and he is joined on the board by Judy Redlinger of Seaton. Hugh works at the Joy State Bank and both have Mercer County roots. Our deepest appreciation for a difficult job well-done to outgoing treasurer John Huffstutler. He continued as our treasurer for nearly a year after retiring from the board.

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What is It?

The previous item was a Model T tire chain, one of five per tire. The leather ring goes around the spokes and the metal piece over the rim. This item is 11" long and made out of wood.



Curator's Corner

We were pleased to have had approximately 100 guests at our special "Evening at the Museum" in September. Hopefully those as well as others will be more frequent visitors and those who are not already members will consider doing so. Receiving the current newsletter and making use of the genealogical materials are just two of the benefits of membership.

Sometime during the winter there will be construction on the **bathrooms making them handicapped accessible**. This is a major project, but a necessary one before the new building addition can begin. This is an expensive endeavor and **donations to the building fund will be greatly appreciated**. Due to construction there may be times in the winter when the museum will be closed so keep an eye on our website/Facebook pages for updates.

A **Trivia Night** fundraiser is being planned for Nov. 14. Watch for more details on the website/Facebook pages, the Times Record, and WRMJ.

Veda

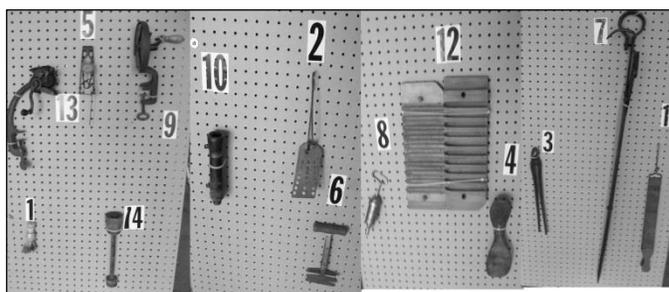
Meriwether, Curator



Coming Events

Oct. 19 Annual open meeting, 7:00 p.m. at the museum
Mike Zecher on Lincoln funeral reenactment
Oct. 31 Last day of summer hours
Nov. 7 Begin winter hours, Sat. only 12:00-4:00
Nov. 14 Trivia night (Tentative date. More info later.)

Name the Tools 2015



1. Shaving brush
2. Pancake turner
3. Blacksmith tool
4. Shoe lathe
5. Mole trap
6. Food chopper
7. Hay fork (Anchors a pile of hay so it can be raised into the mow.)
8. Grease gun
9. Green bean slicer
10. Buggy whip holder
11. Razor strap
12. Cigar mold
13. Raisin seeder
14. Fuel gauge

Congratulations to our two random drawing winners:
Christian Denhart and Gary Price.

This newsletter sponsored by:



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