

Mercer County Historical Society Newsletter

"Preserving Mercer County History"

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Mercer County Historical Society &

Essley-Noble Museum

1406 - SE 2nd Avenue
Aledo, IL 61231
Phone: 309/582-2280

Hours

April – Oct: Thurs, Fri, Sat, Sun 1-5:00pm
Nov - March: Saturdays 12:00-4:00pm



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MCHS Genealogy Dept.
PO Box 269
Aledo IL 61231-2504
Or: email the museum



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Essley-Noble Museum
Box 269
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Titanic Survivor Became Principal of Aledo High School

by Stephanie Braucht

When the great and supposedly unsinkable *RMS Titanic* struck an iceberg and sank on April 15, 1912, sending more than 1500 people to their deaths, no doubt the residents in Mercer County were as shocked and saddened as everyone around the world. No one could have known, though, that the town of Aledo would soon have a connection to this event.

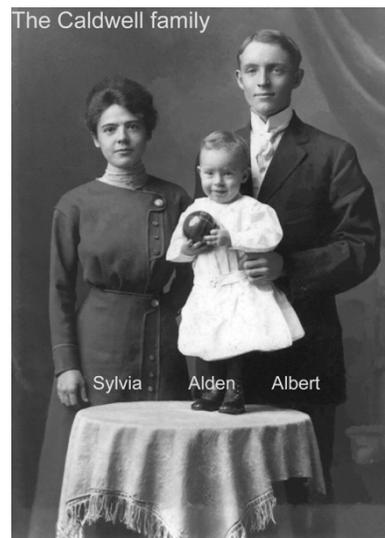
In the summer of 1912, the Aledo school board was looking for a new high school principal, and they hired a man named Albert Francis Caldwell to fill that vacancy. At the time, Albert, his wife, and their young son were living with Albert's parents in nearby Biggsville after having recently returned to the United States from abroad. Their return journey was on, or rather, *began* onboard the *Titanic*. They were fortunate to have been among the barely 700 survivors out of the 2,240 passengers and crew aboard on that ill-fated voyage. Their story of how they came to be on the *Titanic* and how they survived is very interesting.

Albert was born September 8, 1885, in Sanborn, IA, the first child of William Elliott Caldwell and Frances "Fannie" Gates. William Caldwell was a Presbyterian minister. After high school, Albert attended Park College (now Park University) in Parkville, MO, where he met his future wife, Sylvia Harbaugh. During their senior year Albert and Sylvia both began exploring the possibility of going to Siam (now Thailand) after graduation. Albert was being recruited by the Presbyterian Church to teach in a boys' missionary school in Bangkok. Sylvia felt that she was prepared to live in Siam and to help out as Albert's wife. The couple married on September 1, 1909, at the home of Sylvia's parents in Colorado Springs, CO.

On their wedding day they began their journey to Siam. Their honeymoon was spent traveling to San Francisco to board the *Manchuria*, which would take them across the Pacific Ocean. The *Manchuria* billed itself as a luxury ship and claimed that it was constructed to assure "freedom from seasickness." Unfortunately, that was not their experience. Their crossing took nearly six weeks, and they were both seasick, Sylvia especially so.

The plan, to which they had agreed, called for Albert to teach in the boys' school for seven years, learn the language, and basically serve an apprenticeship in running the school. After that, he would return to the United States for a year's furlough, and then return to take over the school permanently.

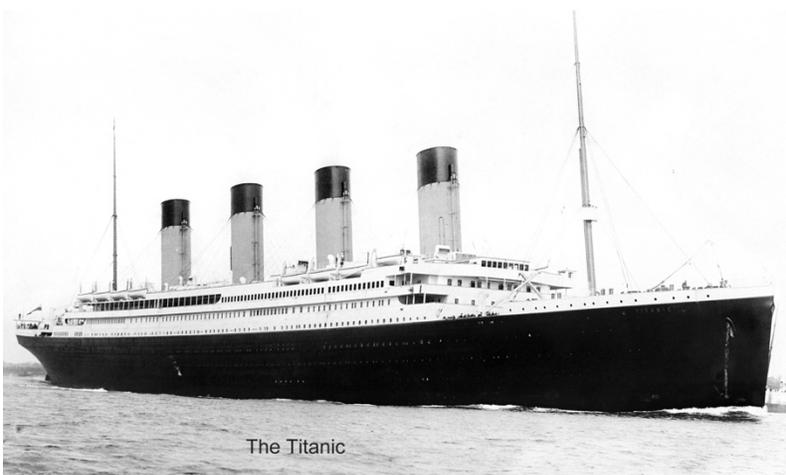
Apparently the Caldwells loved Siam- for a while. By November 1910,



Sylvia found that she was pregnant. She had been teaching in the school, but it was taking a toll on her, especially due to the tropical climate. After a school vacation in the hottest months of March and April, Sylvia did not return to teaching. The baby boy, Alden Gates Caldwell, was born June 10, 1911. Within a month, Sylvia was suffering with a fever. She was not getting her strength back. She was certain she was terribly ill. A former missionary doctor still working in the area diagnosed her with neurasthenia, a term that is no longer used. In those days it would have denoted more of a psychiatric disorder. Postpartum depression might be diagnosed instead today. At any rate, the doctor reported that the probable cause was living in the tropics and recommended that she return to the United States.

The officials of the Presbyterian Church with whom Albert had signed a contract, were not in favor of this. They felt that they had invested much time and money in Albert and Sylvia as missionaries, and they expected them to fulfill their commitment. It is a long and complicated story about all they had to go through in order to be able to leave their post in Bangkok and come home to the United States.

Nevertheless, they packed up all their belongings and left Siam on about February 21, 1912. They took a little steamer to Singapore, and then took a German liner to Naples, Italy. Sylvia was seasick pretty much the entire time. They planned to spend some time for recuperation in Naples, but learned there had been a cholera epidemic there the year before. It had been kept quiet by the Italian government. With Sylvia's poor health and Alden's young age, they decided they needed to move on as soon as possible. So they began looking for a ship that could bring them back to the United States. They noticed a poster for the new ship named the *Titanic*. It was the largest liner in the world, making it the least likely to cause seasickness. It was leaving England on its maiden voyage on April 10. So they set off by train to go to London.



Once in London, Albert began the arduous task of getting tickets for the trip on the *Titanic*. They wanted to go second class. Second class was all sold out. He chatted up the clerks and they got to know him. Finally one of them told him that there was a cancellation every day and if he came back the next day and waited around, he could have the first cancellation that came up. He resolved that he would take even a first class ticket or a third class one. They just needed to be on that boat. Sure enough, the next day there was a cancellation for second class, and the Caldwells had their reservation for going home on the *Titanic*. On April 10, 1912, they sailed out of London.

Conditions onboard were pleasant. The weather was nice. The sea was calm. There was no seasickness. Fellow travelers were pleasant. Alden was a charmer. On Sunday, April 14, the temperature began to fall, and by evening it was very cold. The warmest place was in bed, under the covers. At 11:40 p.m. Sylvia felt a sudden shudder of the ship. That was the beginning of the end.

They had hit an iceberg. What followed was a period of lack of concern, followed by conflicting information, and then conflicting orders. Finally the order came, "To the lifeboats! Women and children first!" Upon observing how the lifeboats were being lowered into the blackness of the sea, and some of them

nearly overturned, Albert and Sylvia were very reluctant for her to take little Alden to get into one of them. That, in itself, would have been difficult for her. She did not have the strength to carry him. She was unable to go up one of the ladders she needed to ascend. They had made the decision to not go, and remain on the ship (which they had been told was unsinkable). A crew member told Albert to go along so that he could carry and hold Alden and help his wife. Ultimately Albert, Sylvia, and Alden got in Lifeboat 13 and were lowered to the sea. From that lifeboat, they watched the *Titanic* sink into the sea, along with all their worldly possessions and any money they had saved up for their new life at home.

So, without any possessions or any money, the Caldwells came to Albert's parents in Biggsville, where the elder Caldwell was pastor of the Presbyterian Church. After rest and recuperation, Albert began

looking for employment. And Aledo needed a high school principal. The timing was perfect. Albert was principal there for the 1912-1913 and 1913-1914 school years. In addition to serving as principal, he taught five classes, coached the basketball team, and directed the male glee club. We regret that we have been unable to find any school pictures or school memorabilia documenting his time in that position. We have been able to find several articles in the *Times Record* from 1912 to 1914 that document their presence here, as well as an article in the *Henderson County Journal*, July 24, 1912, that tells of Albert's hiring by the Aledo school board. We also know that Albert's sister, Vera Caldwell, a graduate of Biggsville High School, attended William and Vashti College in Aledo during the first year that Albert was principal at Aledo High School. Furthermore, researcher Jean Wistedt found the deed records of Albert Caldwell's purchase of Lots 5 and 8 in Block 8 of Willits and Thompson's Addition to the Original Town of Aledo. We learned from an article in the *Aledo Democrat* (June 16, 1914) that A. F. Caldwell subsequently was selling a "modern 6-room cottage, two lots, desirable location. Terms reasonable."

The reason the Caldwells were selling their home is that Albert had taken a new position in Ames, IA., where he had been hired as principal of Ames High School. He also planned to do graduate work at Iowa State College (now University). Albert and Sylvia had a second son, Raymond Milton Caldwell, born December 21, 1914. Albert was principal at Ames High School for two years, and then he sold cars for the Overland Motor Company for two years. After that he was superintendent of schools for Richland Center, WI. In 1923 Albert became an insurance salesman in Bloomington, IL. He sold life insurance, first for Prudential Life and Massachusetts Life and then for State Farm Insurance. Albert and Sylvia divorced in 1930.

There is much more to the lives of both Albert and Sylvia. Two excellent books have been written about them by Julie Hedgepeth Williams, Albert's great niece. The books are *A Rare Titanic Family: The Caldwell Story of Survival* and *Author's Documentation on A Rare Titanic Family*. Both are published by NewSouth Books, Montgomery, 2012. The accompanying photo appears courtesy of NewSouth Books. While it was not taken in Aledo, it appears to have been from the time frame during which they lived here.



Curator's Corner

Starting in April our museum open hours will be Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 1:00 pm to 5:00 pm.

Come see our latest WWI information, donated to us by Dave McKnight. What a find! We now have 16 binders full of the enlistment cards with information about each person who enlisted in Mercer County and served in WWI. Bill Bertrand and Jo Knox have made it possible to display the information. Jo has organized the cards for easy access.

Veda Meriwether, Curator



Cemetery Maintenance

It will soon be mowing time for our area cemeteries, and they need help with maintenance. Our larger cemeteries get some tax help, but not all of them. The old cemeteries have stones that need help as the old brick foundations have been shifting with time. Some are not easy fixes as the tools to update them are not available. If you have noticed your family stone needing a little TLC contact those in charge and find out what can be done. Also, donate to the upkeep of the cemetery (such as mowing) as this is an expense that can be a hardship. Some of these cemeteries date back to the middle 1800's. We have a list of contacts at the Essley-Noble Museum.

In addition, our book *Mercer County Cemeteries* is available again after being sold out. There are 87 pages with color photos of the cemeteries along with descriptions of their locations and GPS co-ordinates. The cemeteries are cross-indexed under their various names. Books are \$25 at the museum or if you wish to order by mail, include \$3 postage.



Spring Open Program

Join us **Monday April 17** for our spring open program, 7:00 p.m. at the Essley-Noble Museum. Our own Ronn Dillavou will present "The Hobby of Collecting," giving tips on why we collect and how to collect, and he will display examples from his collection of farm primitives. Whether as a hobby after retirement or if you just want to get into collecting, Ronn will share advice on how to get started as well how to proceed with collecting.

The program is open to the public with no admission charge. Refreshments will be served afterwards and you will have an opportunity to socialize and explore the museum's exhibits.

Rhubarb Fest

Pies, cobblers, and crisps of rhubarb or other flavors are needed for the Mercer County Historical Society to sell at the upcoming Rhubarb Fest. Items will be needed by Saturday June 3. If you can donate any of these baked goods, or can volunteer to work a shift in our booth in the pavilion in Central Park, please call Judy Redlinger 773-458-3899 to let her know. All proceeds from this activity go to the Mercer County Historical Society and the Essley-Noble Museum. Thank you for any and all donations!



What is It?



The item in the past newsletter was a cracklin' squeezer. Cracklings are the crisp residues left after lard has been rendered from a hog's fat. The item pictured is made of metal, about 6 1/2" long with a hollow cone at the end with a sharp blade along one side.

What is it?

Volunteers for 5th Grade Tours

We are looking for volunteers for our 5th grade tours for the mornings of May 10, 11, and 12th. Those of you from last year will be notified, but additional volunteers are always needed and welcome. No special skills are necessary and we will find a place for you for all or any of the days. Your reward will be the fun of watching the students learn and enjoy themselves while doing hands-on activities, plus a free lunch and fellowship for the volunteers at noon. If you can help out, contact Linda Morrow at 1-309-737-0999.



Coming Events

- Apr. 1** Start of regular hours
Thur/Fri/Sat 1-5:00
- April 17** Spring program "Hobby of Collecting"
by Ronn Dillavou
7:00 p.m. at the museum
- May 10, 11, 12** 5th grade tours
- June 3** Dessert in the park at Rhubarb Fest.
Extended museum hours
- July 11-15** Mercer Co. Fair booth in Merchants Bld.

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Financial Representative, Pro Status
210 SE Third
PO Box 40
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www.countryfinancial.com/tracy.bigham
tracy.bigham@countryfinancial.com
(309) 582-5341



Jason Potter MBA
Financial Representative
210 SE Third
PO Box 40
Aledo, IL 61231
www.countryfinancial.com/jason.potter
jason.potter@countryfinancial.com
(309) 582-5341