



Mercer County Historical Society Newsletter

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Mercer County Historical Society & Essley-Noble Museum

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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: E-mail the museum

Email: mcmuseum@frontier.com



Please address all correspondence to:
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Memberships available for \$15/household

For membership or change of address contact:

Essley-Noble Museum
Box 269
Aledo, IL 61231



Website: www.mchsil.org
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The New Boston Ferry

By Stephanie Braucht

When Norm Baggett ceased operating his New Boston Ferry Service at the end of the summer of 1974, it was the oldest ferry service on the Upper Mississippi River. However, exactly how old the service was is not known. The first official record of a ferry operating from New Boston across the Mississippi to Iowa dates from April of 1834, at the first meeting of the newly created Mercer County Commissioners (now the Board of Supervisors). At that meeting one of the items of business was to grant William Dennison a ferry license, a highly important appointment. The license was granted for as long as Dennison wanted it, or as long as he continued to pay the annual tax of four dollars per year. At that time, other than wading across, riding a horse across, or driving a wagon pulled by horses across, when and where the water level was low, a ferry was the main way to cross the mighty Mississippi.

Revolutionary War veteran William Dennison had come to the area that is now New Boston in 1827. After observing the many steamboats passing by with their loads of lead from Galena, he established a trading post and a business selling wood to the steamboats for their power. Reportedly he found a ferry already in place when he arrived. Apparently either the French traders or local Indians had established a ferry service before Illinois even acquired statehood in 1818.

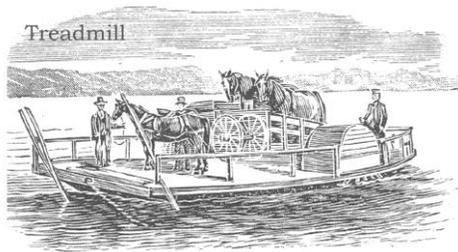
When the Mercer County Commissioners issued the first license to Mr. Dennison, they specified the following rates:

Four Horse Wagon	\$1.50
Horse and Rider	\$.50
Cattle or Horses, per head	\$.18 3/4
Hogs or Sheep, per head	\$.06 1/4
Two Horse Wagon	\$1.00
Foot Pedestrian	\$.18 3/4
Yoke of Work Cattle	\$.50
All Freight (price per 100 lbs.)	\$.06 1/4

Up until 1845, it is uncertain as to what kind of power was used for the New Boston ferry. We only know what was typical for the times. The very earliest ferries likely would have been simple rafts, powered, either by rowing or poling or using the current of the river, with "sweeps" (a long handled rudder in front and in back) for steering. Horses would have been used on the river banks to pull the raft back upstream prior to the next crossing, as the current would have forced its course downriver. The river would not have been as deep as we know it today, since this was prior to the construction of the current lock and dam system and even prior to the construction of wing dams.

It wasn't until 1878 that the U.S. Congress authorized the Army Corps of Engineers to establish a 4 1/2 foot deep channel by closing secondary channels, dredging, and building wing dams. Presumably the channel was lower than 4 1/2 feet in many places prior to that time. The federal Rivers and Harbors Act of 1930 subsequently authorized a channel that was at least 9 feet deep and 400 feet wide. This was accomplished by dredging and building the series of locks and dams that we see today.

The next innovation in ferry boats was to use horses for power on the ferries. The horse-powered treadmill boat was patented in 1819 and would dominate the ferry business for the next twenty years. A large horizontal wheel was placed under the deck of the ferry, with an opening just large enough for a horse or horses (sometimes up to 6 of them) to walk on it. Beginning in the 1840's, the treadmill began to replace the horizontal treadmill. These horse-powered treadmill ferries were cheap and effective, and would be used in North America into the 1920's.



By the time of his death in 1840, William Dennison must have been using some form of a horse-powered ferry, whether treadmill or treadmill. It appears that his son, Erastus, who continued the business, changed from horse to steam for power. It also appears that the public was not happy both with young Mr. Dennison's service and with the use of steam for power. One drawback of steam power was that patrons had to wait for the engine to "get up steam." Another drawback of steam power was that the early steam engines sometimes exploded (a problem also encountered on paddle-wheel steamboats). No doubt people were concerned about that danger, too. Even though Erastus changed back to horse power in 1845, by February of 1846, Harley Ives was operating the ferry, and he maintained the use of horse power.

Harley Ives owned and operated the ferry until 1852, when it was taken over by Z.P. Willet. In 1861, the city of New Boston took ownership of the ferry and prepared to convert it to steam (again). One wonders what had happened in the past 20 years to make the public more accepting of steam power on their ferry.

A year after the city assumed ownership, it was sold to Andrew Noble. In 1877 Harley Ives again began operating the ferry, followed by H.H. Roberts and then J.B. Robins. During Robins' ownership, the ferry operated with a gasoline-powered engine for the first time (1899).

Subsequent owners were H.F. Babbitt and then Leander Wade. After his death, Wade's wife continued to run it for two years. Sylvester Hysted owned the ferry next, and he employed a coast guard-approved licensed river pilot, William "Blackie" Lockhand. During this time the ferry became a barge with a tug(boat) on the side for power. Six or more cars would fit on the barge, and passengers rode in the tug. Sylvester's wife, Grace, and son, Troy, continued to operate for a few years after Sylvester died. Burr Hawkins helped them, and Boyd Ellsworth and Son managed the ferry for a while for them.

Hartzell O'Dell bought the business in 1942. His ferry, which he called the Mt. Ida, was directly powered by a 145 HP gasoline motor; there was no tug. The Mt. Ida could carry six cars or 22 tons. In 1949 he carried an average of 125 cars per week. He also carried many loads of livestock across the river, usually for farmers taking their livestock to market in Iowa. On one memorable trip he carried 56 head of cattle and 6 horses. During this time, a flag system was developed to indicate that the ferry was needed.



There was a 30-foot tall flagpole with a white flag at New Boston, and a matching flagpole with a yellow flag on the shore at Oakville, IA. If a person needed the ferry and it was on the other side of the river, he or she simply raised the flag.

George Mason was the next owner (1953-1958), followed by Walter St. Ores. St. Ores sold the ferry to Norm Baggett in November of 1963.

Norm, who came to Mercer County to teach industrial arts at Westmer High School, had developed a deep interest in the river and already had obtained his pilot's license by the time he bought the ferry from St. Ores. Operating the ferry became his summertime occupation. The ferry ran from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m., seven days a week. He charged \$1.50 for cars, \$1.50 to \$6.00 for trucks, and 25 cents for foot

passengers. His ferry consisted of a 60 x 18 foot steel barge and a 30 foot towboat powered by two Chevrolet engines. It could carry 8 cars or 22 tons. One of the photos shows Norm taking a group of his students on a field trip to the Old Threshers Reunion in Mt. Pleasant, IA (about 1967). On that trip he was the teacher, the chaperone, the school bus driver, and the ferry pilot! In the summer of 1973, silt was building up at the Oakville, IA



landing site, where the Iowa River empties into the Mississippi, interfering with the ferry's ability to operate. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers was responsible for keeping the main river channel open, but had no responsibility for the landing site of the ferry. On December 14, 1974, Norm and Richard Temple took the ferry for their last cruise. They were headed 140 miles down the Mississippi to Grafton and then 140 miles north up the Illinois River to Bath, Illinois. The new owner was the Pekin Hardwood Lumber Company, who planned to use the ferry to haul lumber from the islands in the Illinois River. That trip marked the end of an era in river travel for Mercer County.

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Curator's Corner

Spring is here and our volunteers have made changes at the museum. The machine shed is getting a face lift as I am writing this. Our regular open hours begin April 1 Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday 1-5:00 so you will have more opportunities to visit old and new exhibits, the genealogy department, and share your own stories or artifacts from Mercer County. Remember to bring visitors from out of town who would be interested in seeing our exhibits.

Our new accessions for 2012 are from: Charles Hilligoss, Audrey Brown, Emogene Kimball, Carrie Pardo, Earl Etheridge, SuAnn Johnston Thomas, Blain/Stephanie Braucht, Cindy Lenger, Lyle Kugler, Elsa Smith Anderson, and Keith Chandler. Thanks to all who donated.

We are looking forward to the open meeting on April 16th. President Truman will be speaking!

All past volunteers or any new ones- you might be asked to help with the 5th grade tour in May. We are looking forward to hosting 5th graders from both

Mercer County and Matherville Intermediate Schools this year.

Veda Meriwether, Curator



Spring Open Meeting

11Our Spring open meeting will be Monday April 16, 7:00 p.m. at the museum. We are honored to have President Harry S. Truman speaking to us, as portrayed by Niel M. Johnson. Mr. Johnson moved to Rivoli Township when he was two and has fond memories of Greenbower School there. He attended Viola High and later he moved to Moline. From 1977-1992 he was an archivist and oral historian at the Truman Library in Independence, Missouri, and since 1993 he has been an active impersonator of Mr. Truman. Some may remember Mr. Johnson bringing Truman to a meeting a number of years ago, and although similar, this presentation will be updated. It will hold your interest and you will truly feel as if you have met President Harry S. Truman.



The meeting is open to the public at no charge. Afterwards you will have a chance to tour the museum and refreshments will be served.

Genealogy Classes

The Mercer County Historical Society will be offering a series of classes entitled "Introduction to Researching Your Mercer County Ancestors." This series of four classes will concentrate on teaching about the resources that are available in the genealogy department at the Essley-Noble Museum. Each class will consist of a presentation about specific materials followed by time for participants to begin researching with assistance from the presenters. In order for these classes to be helpful to you, the ancestor(s) you are researching must have been present in Mercer County at some time in order to be documented in a record such as census, marriage, obituary, or burial. Classes will be held from 1-4 p.m. each Thursday in April, starting April 5, at the Essley-Noble Museum. For members of the Mercer County Historical Society, there will be no participation fee. There will be a \$15 participation fee for non-members. Class numbers are limited to 12. Call Stephanie Braucht (309-584-4312) to sign up or if you have questions.



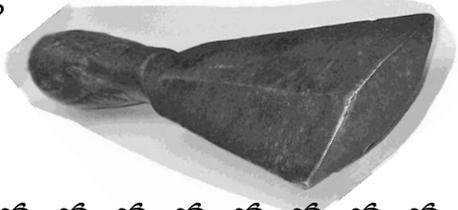
In Search of the Artist

In Search of the Artist is the biography of local artist/writer Frances Cook Steen and is available at the Vintage Button and Serenity stores in Aledo. Also it can be ordered from the author Dino Vlahos, 746 Sycamore Lane, Sleepy Hollow, IL 60118. Phone (847) 836-1952. e-mail: DSVlahos@sbcglobal.net It retails for \$16.95, with shipping/ mailing cost an additional \$3.99. Also, come view the Frances Cook Steen exhibit at the Essley-Noble Museum.



What is It?

The previous "What is It?" was a dandelion or weed digger. This item is approximately 9 inches in length, is metal with a blunt end, and has a wooden handle. What is it???



Query: I am looking for anyone with pictures of Braxton Duncan-Sharon Duncan Wagoner. Contact Sharon Duncan Wagoner, Sherrard IL, 309-236-4264, email swagoner@frontiernet.net

This newsletter sponsored by:

Rhubarb Needed

The Mercer County Historical Society's rhubarb/ice cream booth at Rhubarb Fest selling rhubarb desserts in conjunction with the fish fry is the major money-making event of the year before us. We are in need of rhubarb desserts...pies, cobblers, crisps...to sell. Also, donations of raw rhubarb will be appreciated for our members to make pies. If you can help with donated desserts or rhubarb, or if you can work a shift on Saturday June 2, please call Carol Kiddoo 584-4343. Thank you for any help and be sure to stop by our booth in the NW corner of the pavilion.



Coming Events for 2012:

- April 1** Start of regular hours Wed. Sat. Sun. 1-5:00
- April 16** Spring open meeting 7:00 at the Museum - Niel Johnson portraying Harry S. Truman
- May 15-17** 5th grade tours
- June 2** Dessert at the Rhubarb Fest
- July 10-14** Mercer Co.Fair booth in Merchants' Building Exhibits & "Name the Tools" contest
- Aug. 25** Antique Days special exhibits & extended hours
- Oct. 15** Fall Open Meeting 7:00 Program TBA
- Oct. 31** Last day of regular hours
- Nov. 3** Start of Winter hours Sat. only 12:00-4:00

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