

Mercer County Historical Society Newsletter

"Preserving Mercer County History"

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Editor: Mary Jane Sticklen

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Mercer County Historical Society &

Essley-Noble Museum

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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:*



Essley-Noble Museum
Box 269
Aledo, IL 61231



Website: www.mchsil.org
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Before It Was Route 17

By Stephanie Braucht

State Route 17 runs the entire width of Mercer County, passing through New Windsor, Viola, Aledo, Joy, and ends at the Mississippi River in New Boston. Prior to being designated as Route 17, it was known by a different number. And before that, it was designated by a name. Many will find it hard to believe, and maybe a bit shocking, to find out that it was once officially designated the Swastika Trail.

No doubt going back to the earliest years of the county, when travel was by horseback and horse-drawn vehicles, this particular path was traveled to get from one end of the county to the other. Official Illinois state highway maps (found at idaillinois.org) tell us much of the story, even though maps are available for only some of the years in question. As of 1917 the entire length of the road in Mercer County was dirt, as were most of the roads in the state. Most of the roads were also designated by a name. Each name had a symbol, and these symbols were posted on fence posts, telephone poles, barns, rocks, etc. along the respective routes to help travelers find their way. What is now Route 17 was then called the Swastika Trail.

Today it seems shocking that anyone in the United States would use such a reviled symbol. However, in 1917 the swastika had not yet acquired its horrible reputation. It was not yet associated with Adolph Hitler and the Nazi party. The swastika, from the Sanskrit word "svastika," meaning "all is well," is an ancient symbol. For hundreds and thousands of years it was used as a decorative motif and a symbol of life, the sun, power, strength, and good luck. In some versions of the swastika, the ends of the legs point clockwise and in other versions, the ends of the legs point counter-clockwise. There is little or no difference in the meaning between the two versions. The earliest depiction of a swastika that has been found appears on a bird carved from the tusk of a mammoth discovered in Mezine, Ukraine. Scientists dated it back to 10,000 BCE. Native Americans have used the symbol. It has been found on items from the Mississippian Culture, which lived in the Ohio and Mississippi River Valleys from about 700 to 1540 AD. The Navajo and Dakota tribes still use it. Swastikas have also been found on items in Ancient Greece and Rome. They are used as religious symbols in Buddhism and some other religions, including Christianity, where they have been used as a "hooked" version of the Christian cross. Many Christian churches and cathedrals have the swastika cross among their decorations. During WWI there was a swastika on the shoulder patches of the 45th Division of the American troops. It wasn't until 1920 that Adolph Hitler adopted the swastika as the symbol of his National Socialist German Workers' Party, which became known as the Nazis. Several years were to pass before the

world became aware of the atrocities committed under the flag bearing the previously revered symbol.

So, in 1917, Mercer County had a road named the Swastika Trail. It is speculation, but it seems most likely that the name was chosen to wish good luck to the growing number of motorists who traveled this trail in their automobiles and trucks. Perhaps it was also chosen due to its use by the long vanished Mississippian culture who traveled, hunted, and



fished along the Mississippi River, and lived farther south of Mercer County. By the way, note that the map shows the road crossing the river at New Boston. That's because the ferry trip across the river was considered a portion of the road. Between 1917 and 1921, crews began paving the trail, one portion at a time. The name was gone on the map that was published in 1925, which was when a federal numbering system was devised. The 1932 map shows that the entire length of the road across Mercer County had been paved, and it was called State Route 83. No maps are available for 1933-1939, but the 1940 map is the first one in the online archive that shows this road designated as Route 17.



Curator's Corner

Winter is upon us and we are only open on Saturdays from 12:00 pm to 4:00 pm. There might be times we have to close for renovation of the bathrooms in the main building. If you are planning a trip to the museum, you might want to call first. We are hoping to start a new additional building in the spring. I want to thank all who have donated to our museum this year and thank you to those who have volunteered their time. Have a safe New Year.

Veda Meriwether, Curator



Change of Officers

Thank you for the very capable and long-time service of Bill Bertrand as MCHS President and Dave Duncan as Vice President. Giving them a well-deserved rest, Ronn Dillavou and Beverley Gray, respectively, will take over the offices. Bill and Dave will continue to serve as active board members.

Thank you...

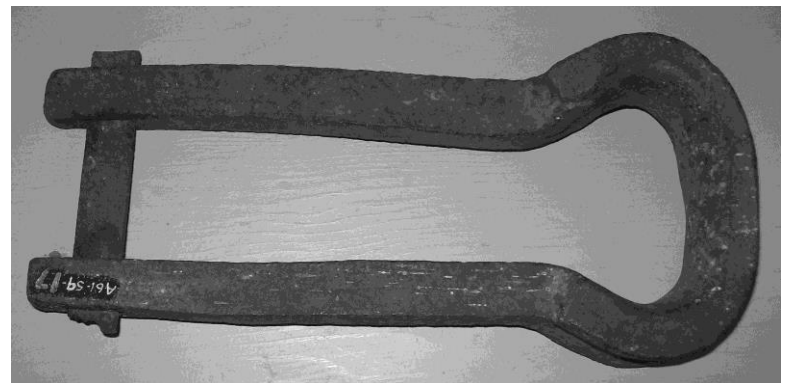
To our corporate members and newsletter sponsors who give us needed financial and community support. Our sincerest apologies if we have left anyone out.

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What is It?

The previous item was a spigot to be driven into a wooden barrel. This item is about 10" long and made out of heavy-duty metal.



Cyclone Bill

by Stephanie Braucht

In every community's history there are tales of well-known and well-loved eccentric personalities. In New Windsor, that would have been William Frear, known as Cyclone Bill. Having been born in the early 1860s, he befriended everyone and did odd jobs around town. Apparently he made and sold a wheeled handcart, one of which he posed with for the accompanying photo.



The creation for which he was most remembered was a forty-foot-high tower called Cyclone Bill's Castle. Located near the railroad tracks, it was constructed from wooden crates and other materials he "re-purposed." If visitors were lucky enough, they were allowed to climb to the top to see the view. Reportedly, his goal was to build it high enough so that he could see the train as it departed the depot in the neighboring town of Viola. Bill died of pneumonia in October of 1925. He was 63 years old. Businesses were closed in honor of his funeral. Many New Windsor residents attended the service, and the businessmen sent flowers. His obituary stated that while he "was eccentric, he had many good qualities. He was honest, industrious, and reliable. No merchant was afraid to trust him." It also said that he was a generous person and shared what little he had.



Thanks to Niel Johnson for the use of his photos and information from his book New Windsor: 125 Years, 1857-1982

Your Support is Vital!

Annual memberships expired December 31, 2015. Membership starts on Jan. 1, we count on dues and donations to provide necessary funds for our projects and for the maintenance of the Essley-Noble Museum complex. Thank you to all our patrons for your contributions!

() **Annual Membership** - \$20.00 (one household)

() **Lifetime Membership** - \$300.00

() **Corporate/Business Fee** - \$100.00

Send to: Essley-Noble Museum
Box 269
Aledo, IL 61231

Name _____

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City _____ State _____ Zip _____

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Coming Events

- Jan. 1 Memberships due. Thank you!
April 2 Start of regular hours
Wed/Sat/Sun. 1-5:00 p.m.
April 18 Tentative date of Spring program TBA
May 5th grade tours, dates TBA
June 4 Dessert in the park at Rhubarb Fest

This newsletter sponsored by:



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