



Mercer County Historical Society Newsletter

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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: E-mail the museum

Email: mcmuseum@frontier.com



Please address all correspondence to:
PO Box 269

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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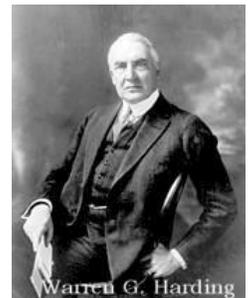
President's Daughter in Mercer County?

By Stephanie Braucht

Scott A. Willits, a talented violinist and teacher at the American Conservatory of Music in Chicago, was born about 1895 in Mercer County. His parents were Allison (Al) and Rose Rader Willits. Scott and his wife, Elizabeth Britton, came often to visit his parents, and many times they brought along a little girl. This young girl, also named Elizabeth (Elizabeth Ann), was the daughter of Elizabeth's sister, Nan Britton. Nan claimed that Elizabeth Ann was the daughter of Warren G. Harding, 29th president of the United States.

Harding and Nan Britton became acquainted when they both lived in Marion, Ohio. By her own accounts, she was infatuated with him and pursued him, even though he was married to Florence Kling DeWolfe. Florence, who was five years older than Harding, was a divorced mother of a young son when they married, and they never had any children together. In 1927 Nan wrote a book entitled *The President's Daughter*, which told about her alleged affair with Mr. Harding, a United States senator at the time of the reported affair. The subject of the book's title, Elizabeth Ann, had been born October 22, 1919. Mr. Harding subsequently was elected to the presidency in 1921, an office he held until his untimely death from a heart attack in 1923. Undoubtedly times were very difficult for a single mother, and society was not kind, so Nan asked her sister and brother-in-law, Elizabeth and Scott Willits, to care for Elizabeth Ann. It appears that they cared for her as if she were their own daughter.

During his life, President Harding never formally acknowledged Elizabeth Ann as his daughter, nor did he provide for her in a will. Nan claims he acknowledged her informally and promised to provide for her. No will was ever found, and the rest of the Harding family denied that he was the father.



The 1910 federal census shows Allison, Rose, and son Scott Willits, age 15, living in New Boston Township. The census of 1920 shows just Allison and Rose, still in New Boston Township. By the 1930 census, Allison and Rose were living in a house they owned on Fourth Street in Keithsburg, and Scott and his wife were living in Chicago. In the 1935 Official Directory of Mercer County, Allison and Rose were living on land they owned in section 22 of Keithsburg Township, just north of the railroad tracks on the road running north out of Keithsburg. This land is currently owned by Dwight and Imogene Welch, who have lived there for more than 50

years. Presumably it was in the house on Fourth Street and the one on the farm north of town where Elizabeth Ann stayed when she came from Chicago to visit. There is a reference in Nan's book about Elizabeth Ann having gone with Scott and Elizabeth to visit his parents on their farm in Illinois.

In 1964, letters between Harding and a confirmed mistress, Mrs. Carrie Fulton Phillips, were the subject of a much publicized lawsuit between Phillips's daughter and nephews of Warren G. Harding. According to an article on the front page of the Rock Island Argus, July 17, 1964, some of these letters reportedly mentioned Nan Britton and her daughter. The lawsuit pertained to ownership of the letters. Mrs. Phillips had given them to a writer under the condition that they not be published until after her death. The result of the lawsuit was that the letters are now in the National Archives, sealed until 2023, the 100th anniversary of Harding's death. In response to the publicity, reporters found Elizabeth, married to Henry E. Blaesing and living with him and their three children in Glendale, CA. At that time she acknowledged that her mother had told her she was the daughter of Harding.



Nolan Hurt wrote a follow-up article for the Rock Island Argus on July 21, 1964. Nolan wrote about the relationship between Elizabeth and the Willits family of Keithsburg. This article also documents Elizabeth's visits to the Willits home in the country, and it says former Keithsburg mayor Mac Dale Brown remembered the little girl well.

Elizabeth died in Oregon, just five years ago, on November 17, 2005. Even though DNA testing was available by then, it was never done. A comparison could still be made between children or grandchildren of Elizabeth Ann and biological relatives of Warren G. Harding. Until that should ever happen, we will be left to wonder---did the daughter of a president come to visit in Mercer County?



Curator's Corner

To our Car Enthusiasts: Come and see our 1901 Oldsmobile donated by the Frank Carlson family. Frank built it and won the Golden Hammer Award

from the Mechanix Illustrated Magazine in 1967. It is decked out in red, like the surrey with the fringe on top. We hope to have it shown off in some of the parades across Mercer County. Thank you, Donita Carlson for the wonderful addition to our museum. We are very proud of all the donations that have come in this year. We can't mention all of the articles but would like to have all of you visit and see for yourself, the interesting items that have come throughout the year.

We also have available a raffle of the Double Eagle \$20 gold piece. You only need \$10 for a chance to win the coin as well as the mahogany case and certificate. The U.S. Mint values the package at around \$1300. For collectors it has gone as high as \$2800 on EBay. It coincidentally has the eagle design on the coin that is much like our new logo for Mercer County School District. Go Eagles!

Remember that we now have Winter hours at the museum: Saturdays 12:00-4:00. Come an afternoon to browse or to do research.

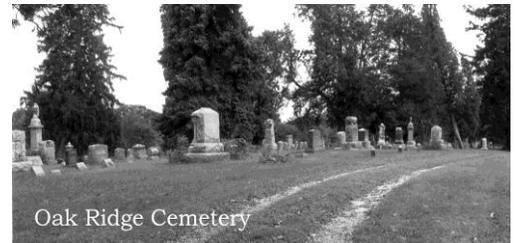
Wishing all of you a prosperous new year.
Veda Meriwether, Curator



Cemetery Book

The Cemetery Committee has put together information, photos, and GPS locations of cemeteries located in and around Mercer County.

We are contemplating having a book published and available at a cost of \$25.00 each if there is enough interest. The book would be in color and would



consist of 87 pages. There are color photos of all the accessible and some not so accessible cemeteries along with the locations, GPS co-ordinates, and cross-indexed under their various names. A list of burials, however, is not included. We have included cemeteries that are close to our borders.

Most of our cemeteries are being taken care of and are still in use. There are some that are not in use and not being kept up because there is no one left to see to it. The old family cemeteries still have stones, but with no upkeep the trees and grass have taken over. Most of our cemeteries are in very good condition. There are several that have nothing left because of farming over them.

If you would be interested in a book like this, please let us know by calling the museum and leaving your name with the curator or on the answering machine. If there is enough interest, we will have a book published. It would be on the order of the Aledo Football book that the Times Record published a few years back



GOLDEN DOUBLE EAGLE RAFFLE

One of our historical society members has very generously donated a 2009 gold Saint-Gaudens Double Eagle coin to MCHS as a prize to be raffled. This prize is especially significant to residents of the Mercer County School District formed in 2009 with the Golden Eagle mascot! The new Double Eagle was minted only in 2009 when 115,178 coins were struck.

The Saint-Gaudens Double Eagle is named for one of the premier sculptors in American history, Augustus Saint-Gaudens. St. Gaudens' work on the "high-relief" \$20 gold piece is considered to be one of the most extraordinary pieces of art on any American coin. The \$20 gold piece was called the "double eagle" because it was worth twice as much as the \$10 gold coin called the "eagle". The high-relief St. Gaudens design was first minted in 1907, when only 12,367 of these coins were struck before the high-relief design was abandoned because of the cost and difficulty of minting. Only the more conventional low-relief double eagles were produced up until 1933, after which the \$20 gold piece was no longer minted.



The 2009 double eagle coin is 24k gold - 1 ounce of 99.99% pure gold! It sold for \$1,239 when first issued by the mint, but price rose as did the price of gold. The value of the coin will continue to fluctuate with the value of gold as well as the demand for it from

collectors. It is now being offered for sale by collectors on e-bay for prices ranging up to \$2,900. One collector states: "These are going to be one of the rarest coins of not just the decade, but perhaps the century and will only become scarcer and increase in value because of the demand".

Tickets for the raffle may be purchased for \$10 from MCHS board members or at the Essley-Noble Museum, which is open on Saturday afternoons, 12-4 from November 1 through March 31. The drawing for the raffle will be at the fall MCHS meeting, **October 17, 2011**. The raffle drawing was originally intended for the spring meeting but that would not provide enough time for ticket sales to even cover the value of the coin.



2010 Donors

Thank you to our many donors of items to the museum. We appreciate your thinking of us and sharing Mercer Co. memorabilia and family histories with the community. Room does not permit us to list all of the items, but come in and see what is new. Below is a list of donors for 2010.

- | | | |
|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| Keith Chandler | Charles Lee | |
| Twyla Holmes | Hugh Nesbitt | |
| Doris Ann McKelvie | Ella Marie Diehl | Terry Stoltz |
| Karen Cartwright | Marilyn Johnston | Barbara Peterson McNeil |
| Pat Gustafson | Audrey Bryant | Ardis Hampton |
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Your Support is Vital!

Annual memberships expired December 31, 2010. 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!

- () **Annual Membership** - \$15.00 (one household)
- () **Lifetime Membership** - \$300.00
- () **Corporate/Business Fee** - \$100.00

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

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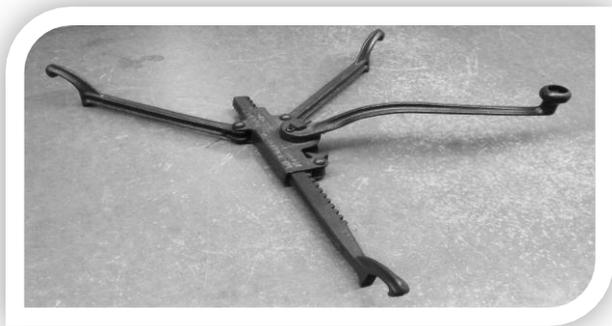
Website Errors

We apologize for those who have tried to contact us through the contacts page. We have only recently discovered that it is likely that none of these messages have gotten through, although the links from the genealogy page have seemed to have been working. If you wish to contact us via email, please enter the address listed on the front page of this newsletter. We do welcome emails and when/if received someone will get back to you. The projects link is to display a number of unidentified persons from photographs in our collection in the hopes that someone will be able to identify them. However, this link has been having trouble getting up. Links to past newsletters are online, but we withhold at least the last year's issues for our members. Please continue to check our website for updates.



What is it?

Board member Richard McMeekan came across this tool that had people stumped. It has two 10" arms that swing and a third with a ratchet that works with a hand crank at the top. It is from The Buckeye Jack MFG Co., Alliance Ohio. Richard and Ronn Dillavou have since identified it, but share your ideas and we will publish the answer in the next newsletter. Look for more "What is it's" in subsequent newsletters.



Welcome

"Welcome to John Huffstutler as our newest board member and treasurer. John is retiring after 38 years as the Mercer Co. Farm Bureau manager and has agreed to take on the job as MCHS treasurer. A huge thank you to long-time board member Jim Runyon who has served as treasure, as well as in many other capacities. Although retiring from the board, Jim plans to remain active with sharing Mercer Co. history."



Coming Events for 2011

- March 26 End of Winter hours
- April 2 Start of regular hours. Wed, Sat, Sun. 1-5:00
- April 18 Spring open meeting 7:00 p.m. at the museum
Program to be announced
- May 5th grade tours
- June 4 Dessert at Rhubarb Fest

This newsletter sponsored by:



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