

TRUTH, TRADITION, OR SOMEWHERE IN BETWEEN
This and That of Local History

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In the annals of World History, much time has been taken in the effort to chronicle the major events through the ages. Little time has been given to the researching and writing of local history. The writing of county histories and the recording of local folk stories and tales became a point of interest after the Civil War.

This paper attempts to give a limited sketch of the work of a local historian. It is an effort to portray the general format of work that is required to fulfill this opportunity of leaving a record of a particular place in a given time period. The search for knowledge on any subject of local history first presents a body of information. Furthermore, it is necessary to seek and to locate evidence to support its truth, or in some instances, to accept the fact that no material is available at this time to support the absolute truth to give credibility to the subject.

How does one become a local historian? First, an individual must come forward with a love for the subject, a great amount of energy, curiosity to accumulate knowledge and be committed to the sharing the information gained. That person must seek inspiration from a number of individuals, both dead or alive, in the community who have a like interest and who are willing to share information. The local historian must be willing to spend untold hours in research and writing, always keeping in mind that somebody out there is going to relate the information from a different angle. After long years of building credibility in the community, through presenting programs, providing the media with information, and serving as a resource, recognition as official local

historian may come. This historian was designated the Official Historian by the City Council of Hopkinsville in November, 1975 and by Christian County Fiscal Court in November, 1976. Several counties in the Pennyrile Development District have also designated official local historians.

A number of individuals, both living and deceased, have inspired this historian with the motivation to collect, preserve, and share the history of Hopkinsville and Christian County.

Urban E. Kennedy (1799-1879), farmer, County Surveyor, State Legislator, religious leader, tanner, and this area's first historian was born in Lincoln County, Kentucky near Stanford. Three years after his birth, his family, in the company of thirty other families, set out for Kentucky by way of Cumberland Gap. In 1809, the Kennedy family moved to Christian (now Todd County) and settled four and a half miles west of Elkton in the (West Fork country) now known as the Bell's Chapel neighborhood. About 1876, three years before his death, Kennedy wrote a series of twenty-six sketches on the early settlement of Christian-Todd counties, which appeared in the *Todd County Witness*. These accounts provide the first chronicle of pioneer life and customs of the early settlers in that portion of the land south of the Green River. Present-day historians have relied extensively on this sage, for his material, as the primary source for information in late twentieth and early twenty-first century writing.

The best known early historian to make a contribution to Christian County never lived here. William Henry Perrin (1834-1891), a Louisville journalist and historian compiled and published the first history of Christian County in 1884. In January, of that

year, he came to the county with two field men and together they researched through May, compiled, then wrote the County History and published it in October. It sold for \$12.50. At that time, good Christian County farmland was selling for \$30.00 an acre. Many questions have been raised through the years, since that crash program, about the correctness of the information gathered in such a short period of time. Though some errors have been located, the crash program was better than none at all. The Perrin history of this county, along with its companion volumes of Todd and Trigg, remain the hallmark of local historical publications to this day. Perrin published fifteen county histories and a state history.

An example of how the efforts of a person may influence others, yet unborn, is portrayed in the life of an individual who inspired this historian to collect old photographs of the community, though she died seventeen years before he was born. Miss Emily B. Perry (1844-1923) was born at Akron, Ohio, the daughter of Rev. Dr. Gideon Babcock Perry, who was a first cousin of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry, hero of the Battle of Lake Erie in the War of 1812. The Perry family moved to Hopkinsville from Natchez, Mississippi in 1867 where Dr. Perry became Rector of Grace Episcopal Church. The family lived in a two-story frame house located on the southeast corner of Ninth and Campbell Streets. "Miss Em", as she was affectionately known, was noted for her community benevolence and assistance to young people. She directed home talent shows for local charities, individuals, and organizations. Her rare talent in training amateur actors and with executive ability and good business judgement, these entertainments were very successful and the proceeds were generous. Funds were raised for Co. "D" military uniforms (Latham Light Guards), the volunteer Fire Company, and

church groups. She founded the first public school library at Clay Street School in 1882, and the young people of the community frequently gathered at her home for entertainment and fellowship. In 1893, Miss Em's newspaper accounts of her trip to the World's Fair in Chicago created great interest throughout the community.

Thirty-two years after her death, a portion of Miss Em's collection of local newspaper clipping scrapbooks, Hopkinsville postcard scenes and old photographs were given to a fourteen year old Hopkinsville boy. This collection formed the nucleus of an expanded group of local photographs and artifacts. More importantly, it generated interest in the mind of a teenage boy to devote a lifetime of effort to collect, chronicle, and share the history of Hopkinsville and Christian County.

Several individuals, out of the past, have contributed information about area churches. Rev. C. H. H. Branch compiled a one-hundredth-anniversary history of First Presbyterian Church in 1914; W.T. Tandy wrote a centennial history of the First Baptist Church in 1919, and Harvey White published a history of Grace Episcopal Church in 1984.

The journalist and daily columnist, Charles M. Meacham (1858-1943), a native of Gracey, devoted much of his adult life to the research and publishing of local history. Both through his newspaper *The Hopkinsville Kentuckian* and the 1930 publication of *The History of Christian County, Kentucky, from Ox Cart to Airplane*, Meacham left a large collection on the subject.

Through the past sixty years several individuals, providing inspiration and information, have left a legacy of motivation for further research and writing.

Wallace H. Henderson (1897-1981), lumber dealer and, long considered, unofficial historian, wrote a number of Athenaeum papers on local history. Walker Wood (1900-1965), co-publisher of the *Kentucky New Era*, and long time writer of the Office Cat column, provided an outlet for this historian to publish old postcard scenes accompanied by historical narrative. Joe Dorris, another veteran *Kentucky New Era* columnist, contributed a great wealth of local history through his "Watching the Parade" column. However, he is best remembered as the "Privy Editor" through his frequent references to the outdoor convenience.

In 1959, Miss Julia Henry (1893-1988) launched a daily radio talk show, *Julia Comes Calling*, on radio station WKOA. Born in Christian County near Newstead, she lived on the family farm for over fifty years. In retirement, Miss Julia moved to Hopkinsville and contributed immeasurably to the advancement of knowledge of local history through the interviews conducted on her radio show between 1959-1978. Many topics of local interest were discussed through many visitors. It was on this show that Miss Julia was the first to suggest the idea of a local history museum. She provided this historian with the platform for presenting topics of local history.

There are among us in the community today two individuals, who through their interest and motivation, are tremendous sparkplugs to this old historian – The first through his humor and search for answers, and the second through his energy and thirst for knowledge. During a Historical Society program a few years ago, a presenter, born in 1945, was regaling the group with his knowledge of crock whiskey jugs. He asked this old historian a question. The answer to which was unknown. The presenter, having jokingly embarrassed the historian, responded that he didn't know the answer either.

Ben S. Wood, III, with one of the most inquisitive minds known to this writer, is a great motivator. One of the great gifts of youth is apparently a vast quantity of inexhaustible energy. This storehouse of pep, provided by the young man, this historian has chosen to carry on the work of local history, is Chris Gilkey, now twenty-seven years old. If one would question his level of energy, then the suggestion is made that others take note of his body language when a bee comes in view.

Through years of effort to make this community more conscious of its heritage a number of mileposts have been experienced.

The small postcard scrapbook from Miss Emily Perry has grown into a collection of thousands of old pictures and negatives of Hopkinsville and Christian County – some dating back to 1865. Public displays have been used in the decorations at Kroger, Applebee's and O'Charleys. For thirty-one years, an annual display, called Expo, was exhibited at the Hopkinsville Community College.

The Christian County Historical Society, organized in 1963, provides informative programs and tours. The Society receives operation funds from a trust established by the will of the late Charles A. McCarroll. A large project of this group was conducted in 1971 with the reproduction of the earliest known map of Christian County. In 1878, the D. G. Beers Co., Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, published and sold copies of a, 5ft X 5ft, five color map – atlas of Christian County. Reprinted by the Methodist Publishing House, Nashville, the map features towns, roads, railroads, and churches with names of farm owners, farm names, and acreage. This reprint of 600 maps was financed by a \$1,000 loan from each of fifteen local businesses. In 2003, the organization moved into a permanent home for meetings and to maintain an office for the Executive Secretary.

Three community wide historical celebrations have been held: The Christennial in 1973; The U.S. Bicentennial in 1976; and the Kentucky Bicentennial of Statehood in 1992. Two pictorial histories have been published, *Gateway I* in 1973 and *Gateway II* in 1981. Proceeds from the sale of these books have been used to finance the cost of restoration of the 1909 Buick, donated by the Frank Yost family, to the Pennyroyal Area Museum. Several high school reunions, along with the 1973 Bethel College reunion, and another planned for next month, are an outgrowth of greater interest and awareness in our local heritage.

In 1975, community interest motivated the establishment of the Pennyroyal Area Museum, with a grand opening held in July 1976. Since that time, 189,905 people have visited the museum. In 1991, the financial success of the museum was assured when a Trust Fund of \$2.3 million was established by terms of the will of the late William S. McCarroll. The Edgar Cayce Home Town Seminar, Supper in the Cemetery, the annual Night Rider Raid re-enactment, and several other programs provide entertainment and education about local history for area people and many out of town visitors.

In 1986, through the leadership of the Christian County Genealogical Society, a biographical history of county people was published, followed by a second edition developed by the local Odd Fellow's Lodge in 1991. These additions have contributed a wealth of information on current families and their background.

In 1999, this historian and his assistant launched the restoration of Beverly Academy, a one-room frame country schoolhouse on the Old Palmyra Road. Built in 1889, and in operation for twenty years, Beverly Academy counted among its "scholars" the world famous clairvoyant Edgar Cayce. Since the reopening of the school as a

historical-educational landmark in September 2000, 1,133 young people have matriculated at Beverly Academy. The museum provides a program for fifth graders to come to the school for a class, games, and lunch. The two-hole privy out back generates more interest among young people than the old schoolhouse.

Another avenue, by which the study of local history may be promoted, is through the newspaper. The *Kentucky New Era* has published four editions of the "Hopkinsville Connection" – two in 2002, and two in 2003. These publications project the proven theory that anything important in the history of the world has a connection with Hopkinsville and Christian County.

The basic mission of a local historian is to research for the truth. Some research immediately leads to "pay dirt", others elude the researcher for a lifetime. Two events, both local, serve as an example of that mission.

On Monday night, November 27, 1916, a mystery woman arrived at the L&N R. R. Depot in Hopkinsville. She was taken to Hotel Main where she registered as Katherine D. Denton, of Evansville, Indiana, and then she left Hopkinsville on Tuesday morning, November 28, on the 5:40 train for Princeton. Information later revealed that she got off the train at Cerulean Springs and there sought out a liveryman, Frank Smith. Smith brought her back to Hopkinsville, in a buggy, where she went to The Hill House and took a room. A little while later the woman left and she walked seven miles out the Princeton Road. When night came, she sought shelter in the Zion Colored Schoolhouse near Brick Church (now Sinking Fork Baptist Church). At 3:30 the next morning (November 29), the building was discovered to be on fire, but those who gathered did not find the woman.

The woman had awakened to find her clothing on fire, had escaped the burning building, and walked naked and barefooted five miles back toward Hopkinsville to the fork of the Cadiz and Princeton Roads. There an old sack was found and wrapping it around her, she went into the house of C. H. Tinsley and got in the bed. Mrs. Tinsley was in the kitchen getting breakfast. Upon discovery, Dr. Frank M. Stites was called to the scene and after medical aid was rendered, the mystery woman was taken to Jennie Stuart Hospital in a Waller and Trice furniture truck.

Fearfully burned about the face, neck, shoulders, and back, and suffering from exposure, the victim died Thursday morning November 30, without revealing her identity. After preparation for burial and a photograph made of the corpse by W. R. Bowles, the remains were buried in Riverside Cemetery on December 5.

There the story ended except for the implication of Frank Smith. In hushed voice, this writer's father, from whom the story was first heard, insinuated the involvement of the Cerulean liveryman. In the spring of 1998, nearly 82 years after the incident, two University of Evansville professors who were researching the life of Edgar Cayce came to Hopkinsville. In random conversation, these two gentlemen related the story of the mystery woman. Their research, confirmed by this historian, revealed the woman to be Helen M. Cannell, of Alton Illinois. She had come to Western Kentucky, seeking Frank Smith to ask for \$100 for treatment of a nervous condition, resulting from an illegal operation performed on her. The woman had been attacked in the St. Louis confectionery store she operated the previous winter.

On December 13, 1916, after arrival of the victim's brother, A. H. Cannell, Alton hardware merchant, the body was exhumed, identified by the brother, and taken by train to Alton for burial.

Is the story finished? Not quite! A final footnote reveals that Frank Smith was the husband of this writer's grandmother's first cousin. Frank Smith left Cerulean Springs in 1916 for St. Louis, where he operated a junk furniture store for the remainder of his life. At the age of ten, this historian met that man. Upon Smith's death in 1957, at age ninety, he was buried at Cerulean. An unsolved mystery is solved? Well, maybe not.

The second story remains unsolved. Why do African American's observe August 8 as a day of celebration for gathering, feasting and relaxation?

May 25, 1861 – General B. F. Butler, in command at Fortress Monroe, Virginia ruled that slaves escaping to his lines would not return to their masters.

Aug. 30, 1861 – General John C. Fremont issued a proclamation declaring that Missouri slaves who took up arms against the United States were free.

Apr. 16, 1862 – The U.S. Congress abolished slavery in the District of Columbia

May 9, 1862 – General David Hunter proclaimed the emancipation of slaves in his Military district (Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina), but President Lincoln disavowed this action.

Sept. 22, 1862 – President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation.

Jan. 1, 1863 – The Emancipation Proclamation went into effect.

Dec. 13, 1865 – The official end of slavery in Kentucky came with the ratification of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

None of the above calendar dates approach the eighth of August, the day which has come to be known as "Emancipation Day", The Eighth of August Celebration, or "Freedom Day". According to oral tradition, apparently originating in East Tennessee, Andrew Johnson, then Military Governor of the Union occupied parts of Tennessee, freed

his own slaves (6) on August 8. There is no record of the actual emancipation of his slaves. In 1871, the day was celebrated in Johnson's hometown of Greenville, Tennessee with a brass – band parade, picnics and speeches. By the late 1880s, the social event had spread westward to include Allensville in Todd County, at Crofton here in Christian County, and to Paducah, Kentucky.

Extensive research has failed to reveal the source of this custom. The annual event, now over a century old, continues in a healthy condition. Such are the experiences faced by a local historian. Some research proves successful; other searches must be left to speculation.

Forty-six years ago, this historian entered room thirty-four at Hopkinsville High School on Walnut Street. Four large windows provided natural light; and, on a cloudy day, six naked light bulbs offered limited illumination. Approximately thirty-five wooden slope top iron-framed desks supported the weight and writing area for the students. A large oak desk at the north end of the room, piled high with spiral notebooks, signaled the location of the master's perch. From the brain of that master teacher, there flowed a constant river of historical knowledge, spiced with stories and punctuated with such examples of entertainment as the "Cremation of Sam McGee", and "Casey at the Bat". The master teacher was Eugene D. Gough who sparked the ignition in the mind of this historian to pursue a life's work, but more importantly he taught us the art of being human.