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DeWitt remembered: Ken resolves to finish the arduous task of cataloging

I've made a New Year's resolution to finish something I started well over 10 years ago — to complete the cataloging and indexing of the photograph collection at the library.

Shortly after librarian Faye Hanson's death in 1982, I volunteered to help organize the scattered local history materials at the library. Much of that has been accomplished, but it's the photographs that have continued to escape me; mainly due to the fact that since that time the collection of photographs has continued to grow from approximately 300 items in 1982 to well over 1,000 at present.

It's no coincidence that the holiday greeting pictured above is of Helen (Dills) Stampfly; she's largely responsible for the beginnings of the library's photo collection. Helen was born in DeWitt in 1889, a daughter of pioneer stock Omar B. Dills and Abbie Hutchins ("O.B. and Abbie"). Her parents' farm was east of DeWitt on the road named for them, Dill Road.

As a young woman Helen got a job at the DeWitt post office, which was then located on the south side of west Main Street in Webb's Jewelry Store. Also working there as a mail carrier was a man named Mark Norris, who happened to be an amateur photographer. Many of his photographs of local scenes were printed on post card stock, which were then sold as novelty items in the post office. Of these, Helen collected quite a number and in later years turned many of them over to the library.

In the 1960's it was Helen's collection of uptown scenes which constituted the majority of the local photographs in the library's collection. During Faye Hanson's years as librarian the library occasionally acquired more photographs, but it wasn't until the 1970's, during the nation's bicentennial, that the historical importance of old photographs, as items of public interest, began to take hold and the library's collection began to grow in earnest.

Since that time many hundreds of pictures have been added to the collection. Sometimes it's been just an individual picture or sometimes, like the recent donation from Don Harnish, they've come in batches of several hundred. Often times, too, it's not been the original photographs but, rather, good quality copies that are acquired by the library. Such was the case with the family photographs of cousins Gerald Pike and the late Neil Cutler. From their combined collections of family photographs nearly 100 pictures were copied, including many rare photographs of some of DeWitt's earliest settlers.

Although original photographs are usually preferable to copies, it's the visual documentation that's important for the library's purpose. And, as the picture above illustrates, most photographs offer documentation of more than one subject matter. Want an example of a 1910 Christmas card? There it is. Want to see what a well dressed woman might choose for winter-wear in 1910? There it is. Or, if the Sibley kids want to see what their grandmother looked like in 1910, there she is.

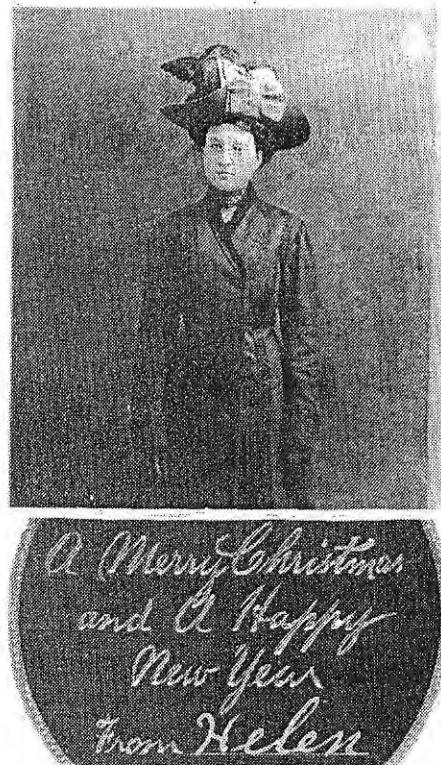


Photo courtesy of Faye Hanson Public Library

"A MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR - from Helen." A postal Christmas card sent from Helen Dills to her friend Reva Treadwell. Ca. 1910.

To date, all the photographs at the library, with the exception of school-related pictures (and that's another kettle of fish), have been assigned an individual identification number and then cataloged as to what kind of photograph, original or copy, who donated it and when, photographer, subject matter and approximate date. Each is then photo copied (it's the photo copies that are put in the binders for the public to look through) and placed in an individual acid-free protective sleeve or folder and filed by their number in archival boxes.

It may not sound like it, but that has actually been the easy part. Now all that is left for me to do is finish the alphabetical index to the whole conglomeration. Guess I'd better get busy; it's going to take some time. By the way, how would you index a photograph of a horse named "Birdie" standing in the middle of Bridge Street?

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian. His column appears here twice monthly.

DeWitt remembered:



Photo courtesy of Faye Hanson Public Library

LANKFORD'S VARIETY STORE, about 1950. And what a variety store it was. If they didn't have what you wanted...you were just a little too persnickety! In the far back was the soda fountain and right up front, the candy counter. In between was everything from fishing licenses to oilcloth. To the right (and out of the picture) was the penny gumball machine. Get a spotted yellow one and you got a dime's worth of free candy. Pictured (l. to r.) are Mattie Staub, George "Hamp" Lankford, and Janet (Lankford) Schultz.

Historical display worth a look at DeWitt Library

By KEN COIN

There is a new photograph display at the library and even if you're not a regular library user, it's worth the visit to see. The theme of the display is "Uptown DeWitt" and it includes a dozen vintage scenes of the four block area which comprised the "uptown" area.

Most of the views on display are part of a special collection of photographs of old DeWitt which was developed several years ago from donations made as a memorial following the death of Faye Hanson in 1982. Nearly 40 old photographs, some from the library's collection and others owned by individuals, were taken to a commercial photographer for negatives and copies. The enlarged copies (many of them blown-up to 16 by 20 inches) offer a depth and clarity of detail that the originals, if displayed, could never provide.

The emphasis of the "Uptown DeWitt" display is on the DeWitt of the earlier part of this century. In fact, only one photograph, this interior view of Lankford's Variety Store, dates to later than 1920. Many of these early views were, I would guess, donated to the library because the donors realized the great change that had occurred to the streetscape of uptown DeWitt following the 1930 fire. By turning these photographs over to the library, the donors were able to in some way preserve their memories of uptown DeWitt.

When putting the display together, I was hesitant to include the picture of Lankford's Variety Store. I mean, it just didn't fit. Everything else seemed to be 1900 to 1920 and here was this lone hold-out from 1950. But, I thought it was such a marvelous picture, I just couldn't refuse it. In the weeks since I've been reflecting and realized why I

had to include it: It was the only picture which preserved my memory of uptown DeWitt.

With that, I've come to the conclusion that time and progress have continued to march on and "old" DeWitt is no longer limited to what was before the 1930 fire. Newer generations have come of age which hold memories of a DeWitt in the 1930's and 40's which included Carris' Drugs, Griswold's Ford Dealership, Eldridge's Hardware, Lietzke's and Reed's Groceries, Town's Dry Goods and Moon's, Cook's and Tucker's General Stores.

As to my own generation, well, The Dairy Bar, The Village Trading Post, Jan's Apparel, Dalman's Hardware, Walter's Filling Station, The Shingle Shack, Walker's Lumber, Mac's Market and Lankford's Variety Store all seem like a very long time ago.

The "Uptown DeWitt" display is a great documentation of Smalltown, USA at the turn of the century. Anyone can view the scenes and appreciate the quaint charm of the streets and the simple architectural beauty of the buildings, many of which were nearing their century mark when they were destroyed by fire in 1930. For those of you who remember DeWitt that way, this display will be an extra treat as it tugs at your memory.

We are very fortunate that the library has these photographs and has developed this display. The plan is to continuously change the display every six months or so and already I'm enthused about possible future themes. I would hope that in the not too distant future we could put together another "Uptown DeWitt" with an emphasis on the 1930's or 50's. But, as of now, the library has only this one picture so, we've got a ways to go.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian. His column appears here twice monthly.

Of women, skirts and the Order of the Eastern Star

By KEN COIN

Decent people don't just go around supposing the possibility of unnatural acts. At the time, no one in DeWitt had yet supposed that women had an option of cutting their hair or asking for the vote, so is it any wonder no one had a premonition of this event? But it happened just the same one March night in the late 1880's when, without prior warning, Sister Ima Alltherage blew in late for the monthly meeting of the Order of the Eastern Star wearing (of all things) a "hiked-up" skirt.

Although her entrance was discreet enough, the usual henhouse roar of the pre-meeting chit-chat stopped on a dime. A bolt of lighting right square on the podium couldn't have gotten a more instantaneous silence. The only immediate sounds were those of 34 chins dropping and the louvers of the shuttered windows snapping closed of their accord for the sake of modesty.

Sister Pennell's jaw fell so freely her new upper plate fell out and plopped into Sister Lawrence's refreshment. Sister VanFleet's spectacles shot right off her nose, bounced off her ample bosom and bobbed around on their fine chain like a little gold bungee jumper. Sister Gunnison, forgetting for the moment she wasn't Catholic, genuflected and Sister Webb stopped breathing entirely.

A quick-thinking Sister McLouth was the first to take action by shoving the ample Sister Lott in front of the framed picture of George Washington (to spare that revered mason the shame of the sight). Sitting off to the side, Sister Hewitt (who couldn't see her own hand in front of her face) smiled brilliantly thinking it must be the Second Coming - until sister Simmons, in an elderly whisper, shouted "Good God, you can even see her shoe button!" - This only confused poor Sister Hewitt as she tried to clear her mind of the blasphemous image of a female Redeemer in high-buttoned shoes.

But Sister McLouth was not confused and as many of the younger women of the Star composed themselves and rushed to Sister Alltherage to gush over her smart get-up, Sister McLouth (like the sovereign of her parents' native England) was "not amused". She was after all the current "Worthy Matron" with the responsibilities of the Order resting on her shoulders. She wasn't about to let this young tart in calf-taffeta undermine the dignity of the Star. "Why?", she said to her self, "didn't I black-ball her two years ago when I had the chance?"

In Sister McLouth's mind it simply was not to be borne and throughout the following month she waged her campaign for propriety. "Hemlines to the floor or we'll show you the door!" was her battle-cry and common decency was her armor. And as the warming of spring turned her battle ground into a morass of muddy streets and farm yards her faithful steed dragged her buggy from one house to another where her visits with the worthy sisters would eventually lead into a tirade on the evils of bawdy fashion.

When the month had elapsed and it was time for the April meeting of the Eastern Star, Sister McLouth came well prepared. To illustrate her case she chose a dress much out of fashion but dramatic in its effect: an old gown with acres of crinoline cascading over a whale-bone hoop which extended nearly a yard in any direction from her feet. She was not surprised that this month several more young women had chosen to join Sister Alltherage by sporting the latest in trolley-wear.

As she began her march up the aisle towards the podium her dress, with a mind of its own, tolled side to side like a giant bell, ringing out a warning. At the podium she shifted from one foot to another and her skirt followed suit by giving the floor a thorough sweeping.



Photo courtesy of Ken Coln

TAKING A STAND for decency and modesty, DeWitt's Sister Cole refuses to display her ankles.

But the sisters failed to give her their undivided attention and she became annoyed. Not nearly as annoyed, however, as the several hornets that were being tossed about by the action of her skirt. Still sleepy from their hibernation, her skirt was their wake-up call. "Ladies, if you please!" Sister McLouth insisted, "We have a matter before us tonight which requires immediate action." That was the hornets' sentiments exactly and without waiting for a vote they each went to work.

At first Sister McLouth wasn't quite sure what to make of the sensation but by the second or third sting (on her tenderest of areas) she caught

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on. And for the second month in a row the ladies of the Eastern Star were shocked into silence when, from their point of view for no apparent reason, Sister McLouth hoisted her voluminous skirt up to her waist (whale bones and all) and broke into a "Bloomer Polka". At add insult to

social disgrace, wouldn't you know it was Sister Alltherage who was the first to catch on. Sitting in the front row with her kid-leather shoes screaming a bolt-fashion statement, she grabbed her handbag and rushed to Sister McLouth's assistance. The chins of the Order again dropped as they watched the scene at the podium.

"What's happening?" demanded blind old Sister Hewitt. "It's the darndest thing!" whisper-yelled Sister Simmons, "Josephine has her skirt up about her waist and Ima's beating her with a pocketbook."

Sister Hewitt sank back smugly into her chair, "Good - she had it coming."

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DeWitt remembered:

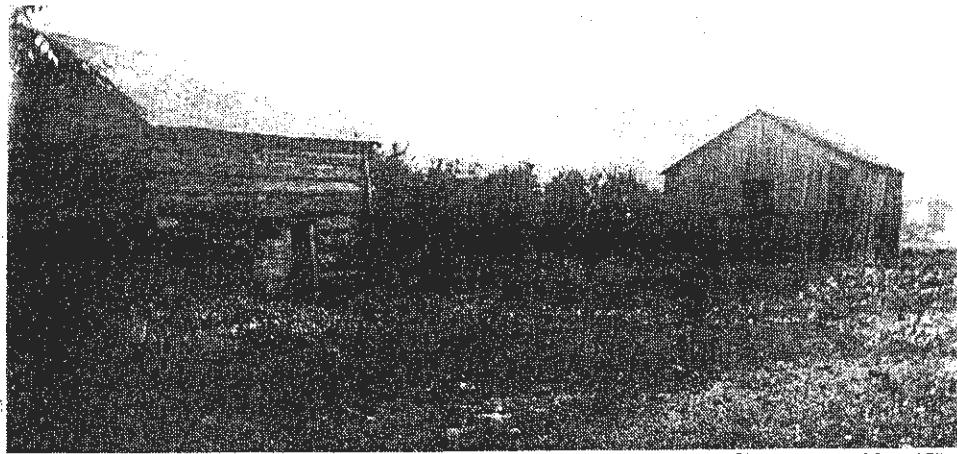


Photo courtesy of Gerald Pike.

A RARE VIEW of the pioneer log cabin and plank barn of the Knapp family. It's location was on the east side of Airport Road, one-half mile north of Chadwick Road. Photo by George S. Pike.

"Cabin fever" isn't what it used to be in DeWitt

By KEN COIN

I've had enough winter. I'm beginning to show signs of cabin fever - that is, a little squirrlier than usual. The term "cabin fever" is derived from scenes such as that above: A house built for two, inhabited by 12, located smack-dab in the middle of nowhere. Now, let's add our fourth month of snow, another new baby, no pasta or chocolate in the cupboard, the horse and grandma are both in the barn, dead, waiting for the ground to thaw and we've had beans, hoecake and fatback for every meal since the Christmas goose got picked clean. In short, we've long since gone over the edge. By now we're a mass-homicide just waiting to happen.

But, you know what? They endured it just fine and actually enjoyed themselves in the process. Why? Two undeniable truths: First, they were better people than we in terms of fortitude. Second, ignorance is bliss. Never underestimate the truth and power of that last sentence. These pioneers who spent one winter after another in cramped cabins watching their children cough themselves to death (quite literally) had absolutely no idea that life held any alternatives.

But as to this little cabin in particular, William HH Knapp, of whom I've written before, was a young lad of nine when he accompanied his family to Clinton County. They lived their first year here in a "crude" cabin at the Simmons homestead until early in the winter of 1845 when the "refined" cabin (pictured here) was built. I will let Mr. Knapp tell of his boyhood home in his own words:

"The house must be built in a hurry and could not be very elaborate. He had very little help if any from the saw mill. There were no joists, no rafters, no roof boards, no sawed flooring."

"The shingles or 'shakes' were split from a near-

by tree. They were about 30-inches long and were laid on the large (roof) poles. The floor was made of planks split from logs."

"We had no stove and no fireplace at first. We made a fire (in the cabin!) by laying green logs one on another against the green log walls of the house and making the fire against the green logs till a thaw when father got clay and made a fireplace."

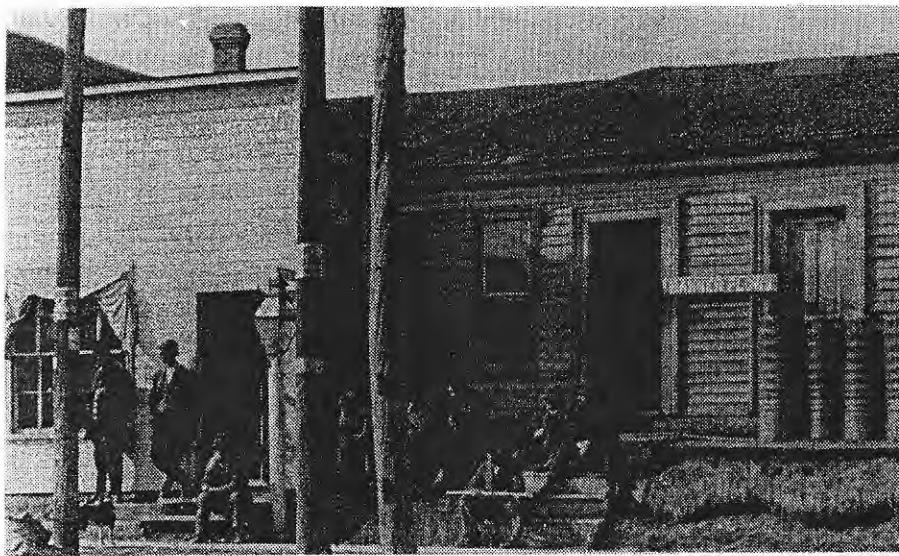
"Father had six men working on our house and in six weeks it was ready to move into. We moved in the evening and before we had the doors and windows in. They hung up buffalo robes that night. When we got up in the morning there had been a heavy snow storm. When we pushed the buffalo robe to one side to look out, the snow tumbled in the house in great shape."

William further relates that the family received their first house guests that same morning in the form of five local Indians: Conobwa and Concobonon (as he spells it) the chiefs from the old Indian village of Wabwahnahseepee, along with Tom Cobenon, Potash and Shantcunigan. William's mother, Lydia, had never seen the local natives before and was rather a nervous hostess, cooking up a storm to keep them happy.

William's family lived in this cabin with eight children (count 'em, eight children!) for about seven years. In 1852 Samuel, the father, purchased a homestead of his own (the home above had actually been located on his brother-in-laws' farm) at the northeast corner of Lehman and Airport roads (later the Phillips farm). There he built a larger cabin which he then filled with yet three more children.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian. His column appears here twice monthly.

DeWitt remembered:



Courtesy photo

A RELIC from the very distant past - the old Clinton County Office Building (on right). East Main Street, ca. 1910.

DeWitt's county courthouse was pride of community

By KEN COIN

Some time ago, Gene Dunham of Lansing gave this picture to Helen Moon who, in turn, passed it along to me. I couldn't have been more tickled. It may not look like much, but I've been searching for a photo of the building on the right for many years.

Get your bearings: This is the north side of East Main Street; the building on the left is now a parking lot, and the building on the right was long ago replaced by the building which now houses Firm Commitment Aerobics (121 E. Main).

As to the building on the left, it was long known as "the pool hall", with the old township hall conveniently located to its immediate left (out of the picture). In this photo, however, with my magnifying glass I can look into the door and see shelves filled with shaving mugs (equals: barbershop). But that's not important. The importance of this photo is the building on the right.

If it looks a little old, odd and awkward in this picture, that's because it was. Obviously suffering from neglect and the indignity of having its porch loaded down with rolls of wire fencing and a misfit sign proclaiming "Banner Plows", this building was once the pride of DeWitt. It was our totem that we were a civilized settlement and an important one too, as the seat of government for Clinton County. This was the county office building.

The DeWitt Settlement was only seven years old and Clinton County was only one year old in 1840 when the subject arose as to county buildings. DeWitt being the county seat and Capt. Scott hoping that it remain such, began doling out lands for the purpose of a county jail (still standing on Washington Street) and a county office building.

The block which is now bounded by Main, Bridge, Franklin and Jefferson streets was originally set aside by Capt. Scott as a "Publick Square" in his plat of the village. But it never became "publick". Capt. Scott had

higher hopes of someday seeing a courthouse built smack dab in the middle of it and until that time, he would retain ownership of it, thank you. What he did allow was for a small lot to be deeded to the county for the purposes of this office building with the stipulation that if the county ceased to use the building or, to be more blunt, if the county seat should be removed from DeWitt, it would revert back to himself or his heirs.

The building was first ordered built in 1840 at a cost of \$439 with the building contract going to William H. Utley, he being "the lowest responsible bidder". Turns out he wasn't so responsible. Two years later, the building remained unbuilt and Seth P. Marvin was appointed to see to its completion.

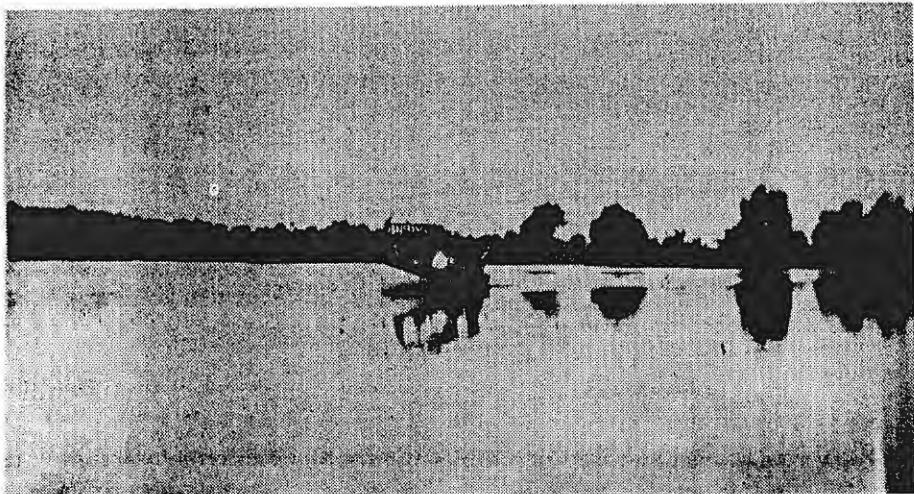
It passed inspection in January of 1843, and the offices of clerk, treasurer, register of deeds and judge of probate took occupancy in the two rooms which comprised the 18 x 30 foot building. Set back from the street on an elevated position, the porch made an ideal stage for political speeches and campaigning and perhaps (as in this picture) a nice spot to just sit a spell and expound your solutions for the world's problems.

After the removal of the county seat to St. Johns in 1857, as was stipulated in the deed, it became the possession of David Scott, Jr., who in turn rented it to DeWitt Township for use as a meeting hall until about 1895, when after his death, the township constructed a hall two doors down to the west.

In 1906, Charity Pearce mentioned in the county newspaper that DeWitt's "old courthouse" was in a sad condition and something should be done to revitalize the landmark. A few years later E. E. Lankton opened a farm implement store in the building and it remained such until 1925 when Glen Cole tore it down to replace it with the current building.

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DeWitt remembered:



The smart set, yachting the pristine waters of beautiful Muskrat Lake aboard the little steam-boat "Cognac". It wasn't much but we didn't know any better. George S. Pike, photographer, ca. 1907.

Merle Beach boat launching is an "event" to remember

The rare photograph above pictures the short-lived excursion boat which once plied the waters of Muskrat Lake (west of DeWitt Road and south of Jason Road) in Olive Township. The boat's port of call was Kittie Moore's "Merle Beach Resort". Equally rare is the following newspaper clipping which I happened across:

(St. Johns News - July 11, 1907)

"Boat Launched" Great event in history of Clinton County.

There was a time in the history of the country when the launching of great boats took place in the harbors of the seaport towns. As the country "grew up", such events became frequent along the lakefronts and on navigable rivers, but not until this week was it demonstrated that a boat, a large boat, could be launched in a creek.

That such a thing was done, and done in a style well befitting the occasion, can be attested by over one hundred friends of Dr. H. Palmer, captain of the new craft.

On Monday afternoon a large number of automobiles and carriages loaded with men hurried to the wharf near Merle Beach to witness the christening and launching of the dredge "Cognac" or "Ko-ni-ak" if the reader prefers the phonetic spelling.

After the whistle had blown a long, happy

blast, the guests were invited abroad where, after all had assembled, Mr. Galusha Pennell was called upon to make the christening address. Although not familiar with making speeches of this nature, the gentleman was in no way abashed, and in words well chosen, commended the work of the "captain", and in breaking a bottle of cognac he christened the ship with the name of that exhilarating French drink and added that the craft might yet do duty on the Panama Canal.

At the close of the ceremonies the guests were given a trip half an hour in length when a call to "high ground" was given to which every man present responded. Refreshments that were refreshing were served and cigars passed, after which the first witnesses of a launching in Clinton County returned to the homes." (No doubt the worse for wear.)

As to the history of the resort itself, well, that's another story. But the fate of the Cognac: I know it offered "excursions" for several years; my grandparents spoke of it (Usually more in terms of a joke than anything special) being there during their whirlwind courtship in the WWI days. Perhaps someday archeologists will uncover it; buried under many feet of Merle Beach muck.

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Mar 14 1994

DeWitt remembered:



Memories of the DeWitt Girls Glee Club from 1952

By KEN COIN

From the top (to the tune of Ta Ra Ra Boom Der-E). Hit it girls!

We are the DeWitt Girls.
We wear our hair in curls.
We wear our dungarees,
Way up above our knees.

We never smoke or drink.
(That's what our mothers think!)
We are the DeWitt Girls.
We are the DeWitt Girls.

I'm taking no responsibility for the following names. I'm just passing them along as they were written on the back of the photo.

Pictured (back row, l. to r.) are Joan Swan, Rosalee Hunt, Ann Piner, Judy Parker, Jeanette Steppy, Shirley Dalman, Lucille

Richter, Gloria Curren, Mary Tenny, Carol Steppay, Janice Parks, Flora Mae Ferguson, Jean Tenny and Ann Tingay, (third row) ?, Sharon Ballard, Joann Hawk, Phyllis Hawk, Thelma Clark, Linda Vermillion, Norma Kranz, Earlene Hicks, Barbara Bliven, Mary Kowalski, Pat Pickell, Charlene Shafley and Jeanette Foy, (second row) Donna Potter, Vera Dague, Jane King, Gretchen Kiebler, Deann Devereaux, Carol Klaver, Jane Miller, Linda Hanson, Dorothy Reed, Anna Mae Rossow, ? Ritcher, Margie Ward, Loretta Sharp (director), (front row) Judy Brainerd, Barbara Swan, Shirley Taylor, Judy Bradfield, Sue Menger, ?, Nancy Ackerman, Ruth Raby, Sharon Tingay and Carol King.

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DeWitt remembered:



THE WINTER HOME of Winfield and Ella Dills, 504 Biscayne Ave., Miami Florida. Photo courtesy of the DeWitt Public Library.

By KEN COIN

Greetings from Florida!

Undoubtedly this post card set a few jaws agape when it arrived at the DeWitt Post Office some 90 years ago. It's an impressive house by any standards. I doubt however if it's still standing - Biscayne Avenue is now Highway 1 which runs right along the beach. The house was probably replaced years ago by a big Art Deco hotel; some pink stucco thing with the work "Hibiscus" in the name.

Winfield "Scott" Dills came to the DeWitt as a young lad in the 1852 with his parents William and Maria Dills. The parents were the original owners of the large brick house at Cutler and DeWitt roads. In 1878 he married Ella Bowker, whose family had moved down to DeWitt from Isabella County in 1871. For some years they operated a farm a mile north of DeWitt (later O.K. White's farm) and in 1893 moved into the village. His business in DeWitt was livestock, buying and

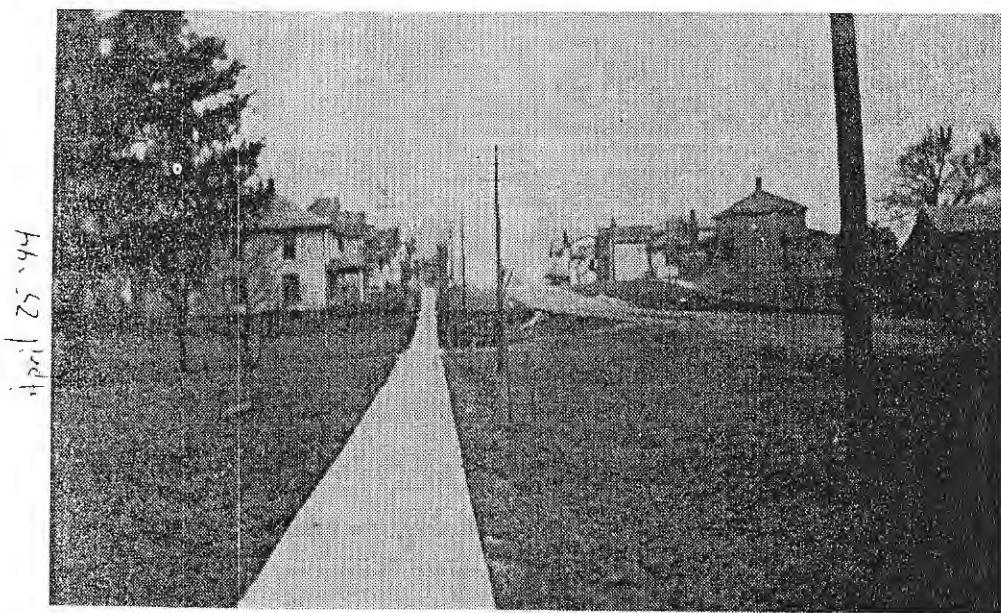
shipping, and he had a lively interest as a horse dealer.

The notion of "wintering" in Florida caught on early among DeWitt's upper crust. By the late 1890's many area couples were congregating at Orange Heights and Orlando. The Dills wintered at and ultimately retired to Miami where, early in this century, they were able to dabble in the real estate boom of that area.

While I'm here, I don't think I'll be tempted into Miami to see if the Dills' home is still standing, but, being the history junkie that I am, I secretly packed a few old photographs and addresses of some homes my great-great-grandfather built in Orlando 90-odd years ago. Maybe after Mickey and Minnie are done showing me around their place, I'll take them for a ride into downtown Orlando.

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DeWitt remembered:



THIS PHOTO WAS TAKEN from Clinton Street looking south towards "Uptown". This is north Bridge Street, the scene of DeWitt's first-recorded fatality. On the far right the post office would later be built in Easton's garden plot. On the left, Eleanor McKinney's current home. An obvious feature of the picture is the straight white sidewalk. One of DeWitt's first, it connected the churches with the cemetery north of town. Courtesy photo.

DeWitt's first big accident was a tragedy

By KEN COIN

I must have been out of town the day they dubbed the corner of Washington and Market streets "Deadman's Curve". Nice of someone to sacrifice themselves so that we could have such a marvelous tourist attraction.

I supposed it could have received the name because of either the funeral home or the jail being located at the crest of the hill. But, I think we all prefer to think that some anonymous teen angel, going a mile-a-minute, littered the river bank with himself and his '52 Bel Air.

However, I don't know of anyone who even suffered so much as a slipped clutch on that curve. There was, of course, that nasty incident with Vicki Willits who wiped out on her bike (all speed - no control). Serious enough for Vicki, even more serious for the Tooth Fairy who had to pay up big time, but hardly worthy of a name as drastic as Deadman's Curve.

From a truly historical perspective, if a map of DeWitt's local attractions were to include mention of any ghastly death scenes, by rights the stretch of Bridge Street pictured here should get the award. After all, it's the location of DeWitt's first recorded traffic fatality and it happened right here on "Deadgal's Grade".

It was August 4, 1864, the fateful day when George Cook and Polly Knapp came rolling into town in George's carriage. Needing to attend to an errand uptown, he parked his rig facing north along the side of Bridge Street. George got out, but Polly remained in place, perched high and proud in the buggy. It wasn't every day a young girl could be seen about town in anything more stylish than the family's ox cart, and she wanted to make sure everyone got a good long look at her.

George was Polly's new beau and they planned to be married. Her parents, Samuel and Lydia (Naracong) Knapp thought George was a fine snag. They already knew two men in DeWitt by that same name and both of them were fine chaps. There was, after all, a certain comfort in name recognition and George Cook (even if this one was

from Gratiot County) would do nicely for their Polly.

Perhaps it was a sudden noise or perhaps Polly opened a parasol to block the sun. Whatever the cause, something spooked the horse. It bolted and began to run. Poor Polly was nearly thrown from the seat but she dug her heels into the floorboard and gripped the dash.

In half an instant the runaway buggy had passed the Baptist Meetinghouse. As it began down the hill, Polly decided to make a jump for it. When the carriage had reached

Madison street she had managed to climb over the seat and with a leap! But when she hit the ground her head struck a rock in the roadway. Pretty Polly Knapp was dead. It was devastating blow to her parents. The year previous, Polly's older brother John had been killed in the war at Bowling Green, Kentucky and the year before that, her sister Sarah had died at home of a mysterious paralysis. And now Polly ... But the sorrow was not to end here for the Knapp's. A mere 17 days later Polly's younger sister, nine year old Mary, died of diphtheria.

DeWitt remembered



DEWITT'S GRADUATING CLASS OF 1914 - Standing (l. to r.) are Elizabeth Heiler, Bernard Zeeb, Hazel Farrier, Tom Staub, Florence Stampfly, (seated, l. to r.) Prof. Schumaker, Laura Williams, Harold Sipley, Agnes Lewis and Donald Clark.

DeWitt's Alumni Banquet was a tradition years ago

By KEN COIN

There's obviously been a terrible mistake! My graduating class is planning a reunion this year and by my ciphering their figure for the number of years since I graduated, subtracted from what I consider my age to be, equates to me being only three years old when I graduated. Something's not right!

I do know, however, that if my grandfather (in the above picture) were still alive, his class would be celebrating it's 80th reunion this year. Now that would be something to feel old about.

Time was, back when graduating classes were much smaller, DeWitt had what was called an Alumni Banquet, which took the curse off reunions for those classes which had only one or two graduates. Ruth Overholt, a graduate of 19 something-or-other, shared with us a precious little booklet which was given at a program for the 1911 Alumni Banquet. It contains a brief history of the beginnings of the Alumni Banquet.

"After the erection of the DeWitt Union School, it remained ungraded until 1896, when mainly through the efforts of Wm. Smith, who was then principal, it was graded.

"Early in 1910 the plan of organizing the graduates of the DeWitt High School into an Alumni Association was conceived, and on May 27, 1910, the first annual meeting and banquet was held at Joe's Tavern. Forty-four enthusiastic alumni were present, and it was decided to hold a banquet every year."

(It should be noted that for many years, to "graduate", was the completion of the 10th grade.)

The second banquet, in 1911, was held at the Grange Hall on north Bridge Street. The menu (printed) included: "Fruit Cocktail, Wafers, Escal-

loped Chicken, Peas, Coffee, Creamed Potatoes, Buns, Olives, Pickles, Salad, Ice Cream, Cake, Nuts and confections."

The program also listed all the graduates up to 1911. 1896: Gerda (Jaye) Dean, 1897: Maud Brazee, James Ranney, Julia Clements, Alta (Gunnison) Pierce, George Pike, 1899: Floyd Williams, Harry Moon, Edward Schavey, Fred Schavey, Charles Reynolds, Fred Tucker, Elmo Hath, Merle (McLouth) Fraas, Maude (White) Carl, Celia (Sipley) Simmons.

1901: Jessie (Harris) Coates, Eva (Simmons) VanFleet, Ada (Simmons) Webb, Florence (Pennell) Sibley, Bert Moon, Rhine Henning, Ray Simmons, Elizabeth Lerg, Elgi Pierce, Lewis Drake, 1902 (none) 1903: Lora (Truesdale) Rouse, Lucille (McLouth) Petersmeyer, 1904: Gerry Dills, Edna Pate, Harry Rouse, 1905: (none)

1906: Helen (Dills) Stampfly, Pansy (Peabody) Stewart, Agnes Lerg, Etta Livermore, 1907: Donald Woodruff, Byrl (Linn) Scott, Blanche Lewis, Marguerite Woodruff, Bessie (Webb) Linn, 1908: Ida Lerg, Bessie Heil, Eugene Smith, 1909: Lawrence Woodruff, Frances Hurd, Norma Beadle, Lelah VanFleet, 1910: Edith Stalker, Lorna Woodruff, Victor Henning, Emma Kauffmann, Velma Garlock, Pearle Baird, Daniel Ellwanger, George Lerg, Roy Smith, Carlyle Smith, 1911: Donald HeWitt, Glenn Gillett, Maude Rose, Maude Devereaux, Lila Doty, Josephine Heiler, Herbert Hurd, Randolph Lorenz, Edwin Pate.

The Alumni Banquet remained an annual social event in the community for over 50 years, but was discontinued in the 1960's for lack of interest.

Ken Coin is a DeWitt resident and the area's primary historian. His column appears twice monthly in the DeWitt-Bath Review.

DeWitt remembered

Eavesdropping tales from Grandma's

By KEN COIN

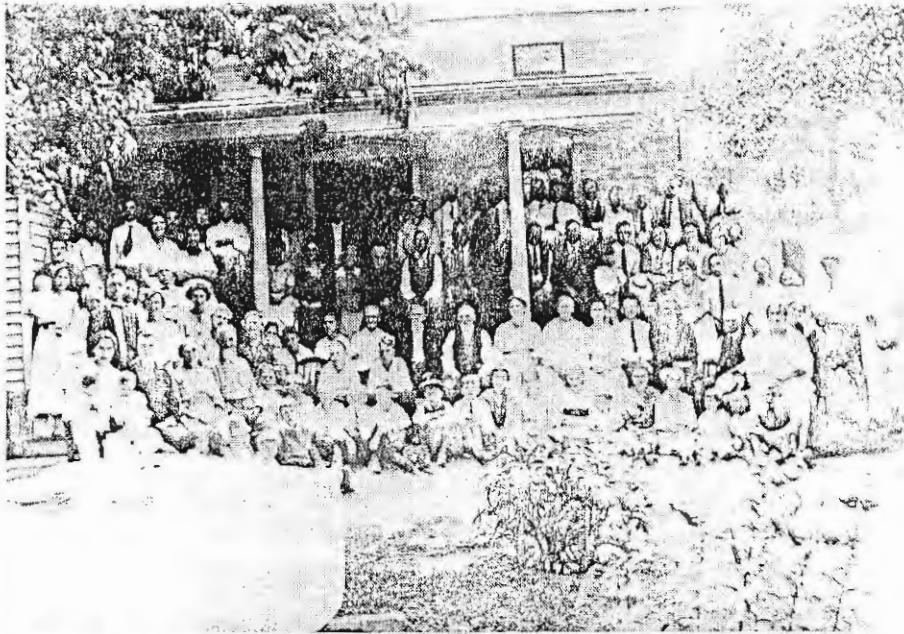
I wish I had a dollar for every time I'm asked, "Where on earth do you come up with this stuff?" Moreover, I wish I had a snappy answer. But, not having yet come up with one, I usually just shrug and say, "Uh, I don't know."

In a way I do know. I'm a listener. Being quiet and unassuming by nature, as a child I had little to say. That was just as well, because I had an older sister who took a keen interest in doing all my talking for me. "How are you doing, bub?", someone might ask me. "He's mad cause he doesn't want to be here cause he thinks your house smells funny", my sister might be thoughtful enough to answer for me.

Being silent and lacking the slightest hint of intelligence, I was often overlooked by adults. In my naive imagination I assumed I was ignored because of my uncanny ability to fade into any background. Sitting on Grandma's couch I could become an afghan. Laying on the floor I looked for all the world like a few yards of Axminster area rug. Leaning against a wall I could become just another sheet of cabbage rose wallpaper. My best trick, sitting with my Grandpa in the yard on his big sitting stone, I could metamorphose into a perfect outcropping of gray granite.

As a result of my cunning camouflage, I easily became privy to a wide variety of marvelous conversations. And my little mind soaked it all up like a hard biscuit to pork gravy.

Occasionally though, even pretending to be a floor lamp wasn't good enough if the conversation became really delicate; say, if we were at Grandma's and during the "big people" talk someone were indiscrete enough to mention Uncle Phil's live-in "housekeeper" (the fact that they had both been dead for 40 years didn't



IN 1926 MARK AND MARTHA (LOCHER) HILL celebrated their 50th Wedding Anniversary with a large gathering at their farm home north of town on DeWitt Road. A study of the group is like "Old Home Week"; a reunion of many familiar faces which bring to mind many quips and stories that I heard over the years. Two copies of this picture were loaned to me. One came from Bonnie (Cutler) Ward whose grandfather, Marc Cutler, is standing dead center on the porch. Another copy came from Lana (Smit) Hardman whose mother, grandparents and great-grandparents were all among the well-wishers for their Uncle Mark and Aunt Martha. Among the rest of the faces I was surprised to find my own great-grandfather and (I think) my grandparents).

matter). Before Grandma's eyebrows had a chance to shoot up to her hairline - "Why don't you kiddies run upstairs to play?...and take that floor lamp with you."

We'd protest a bit just because it was expected, then fall all over each other racing to the top of the steps. In the bedroom over the living room they had a heat register in the floor which opened into the living room ceiling and did nothing more than allow the warm air (and noise) from the living room to escape into the bedroom. There, we'd drop to the floor and press our little faces to the grate and listen as the conversations below regressed to ever more sordid details.

Over the course of my eavesdropping career I learned how best to tip over an outhouse (onto the side with the door - thereby containing the victim); how to panic if gypsies set up camp in the field across the road (lock up the chickens and the kids - in that order); how Uncle Leigh managed to retain his

social dignity (even after he accidentally burned Maple Rapids to the ground); how to teach your children not to acquire a taste for meat or coffee (so you could use their ration stamps for yourself), and more. Oh, there was no end to the useful pearls of wisdom that drifted through that air vent.

After many years of family gatherings, Sunday Night Supper Club and Every-Other Wednesday Play Pedro Till You Pass Out Club, I was able to sop up quite a good working knowledge of DeWitt. And when I would come downstairs, exhausted from my education, and with the pattern of a hot air register impressed into my face, no one was the wiser (except me) and I could pretend to be a chenille throw pillow and fall asleep in a big chair.

But all good things come to an end, and for me, my continuing education came to an abrupt end the day of Grandpa's funeral. Their house was so full of people there was no background to fade into.

(I pretended to be a folding chair but someone sat on me.) Us "kiddies" were soon sent packing upstairs but the register was closed! Every so gingerly my cousin Debbie and I opened the louvers then smashed our faces to the grate. On the couch below we watched the "big people" jumping around and all we heard were shrieks and a few "Oh my (insert your choice: Sakes a Days, Stars and Garters, Aching Back)!"

Not being regulars on the funeral circuit we weren't at first sure but what this wasn't appropriate behavior. Then we heard our names hollered, just once but with a sort of nuclear intensity that only my mother could project. My education took a sudden change in curriculum from Social Behaviors to Corporal Punishment.

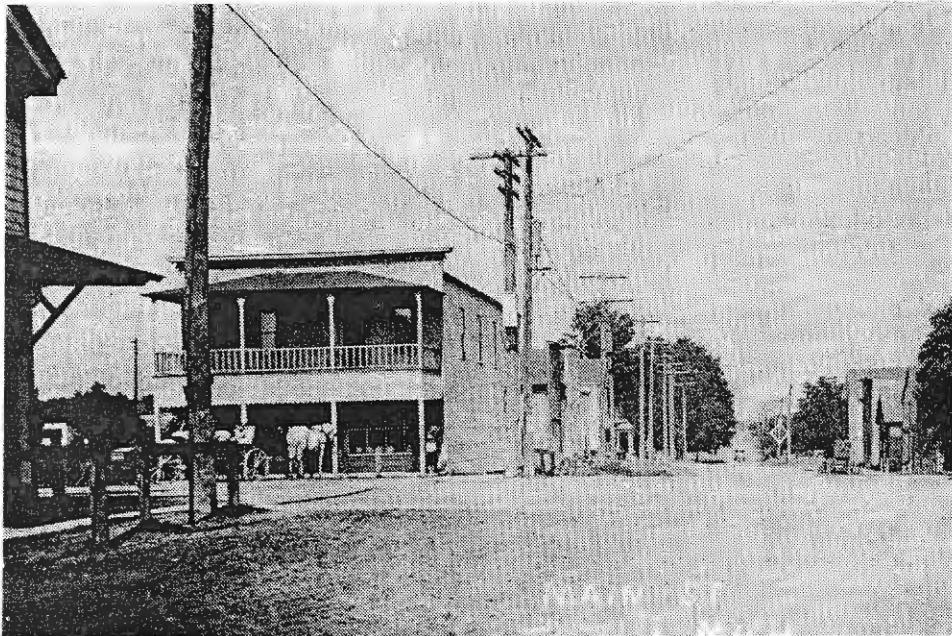
I always assumed that Grandma was a relatively reliable house-keeper. How as I to know that the closed register had a whole winter's accumulation of dead bugs in it? And what was the big deal

anyway? Couldn't someone just help Aunt Bertha pick the dead flies out of her hair for crying out loud? And so what if a wasp nose-dived right into Irene Decker's coffee? It wasn't like she couldn't get up and pour herself a new one. I'll concede though that the stink-bug was a bit much. I know I would've come out of my skin had that been my Jello-O it landed on.

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DeWitt Remembered

Directory finds DeWitt merchants from 1908



HOME BRAZEE AND CO. "The BIG STORE with LITTLE Prices", northeast corner of of Bridge and Main (now on the corner of Foo Ying Restaurant). "Dry Goods and Ladies' furnishings - Paints, Oils, Varnishes, Groceries and Provisions - Goods exchanged for Produce." Ca. 1910. Courtesy photograph.

By KEN COIN

In a recent cleaning of the Ballard Home Center, Rosella Ballard found and passed our way a copy of an old "Pocket Directory" of DeWitt, which I'm guessing dates back to about 1908. Probably intended as a give-away by local merchants, it's chock full of advertisements and useful information to which the following excerpts will prove:

"DeWitt is located in DeWitt Township - Clinton County on Looking Glass River and on the Lansing and St. Johns Electric Ry. 8 miles north of Lansing and 14 miles south of St. Johns

the county seat. It was settled in 1838 (1833) and has a population of about 500. It is a model little city of neat comfortable homes and well kept streets. Its religious interests are well cared for by the Baptist and Methodist churches while the public schools are excellent, well conducted and largely attended. DeWitt has a bank, hotel, barber shop, two meat markets, hardware, drug store, feed mill, creamery, implement house, three general stores, grocer, furniture store, saw mill, two blacksmiths, shoe store, harness shop, coffee roasting plant (what?), jeweler, lumber yard and profes-

sional men, and is a good trading point. The merchants provide well for home buyers and sell their goods as cheap, if not cheaper, than surrounding towns or catalogue businesses.

"A perusal of this directory will acquaint you with some of DeWitt's loyal merchants and post you where to trade.

"Call on JOHN E. WOOD The Furniture Man... Licensed Embalmer and Funeral Director. Everything in this department is performed in the most modern way.

"Hello Central... Give Me FLOYD WILLIAMS The Grocer. Dry Goods and Ladies' Furnishings.

"For a good Shave... go to PETE'S

PLACE (Peter Halterman).

"The best is the cheapest... Go to FRED SCHAVEY The Grocer. Cash is King but we do take butter and eggs.

"EARL VANFLEET Representative for the Continental Casualty Co. Remember - I collect all assessments for the company.

"It's a Fact - A good line of General Merchandise is carried by H. Braze and Co. Goods exchanged for Produce.

"Call on GA Williams - High class goods and every \$1 buys \$1 worth (ask for Red Stamps).

"FP ROSE, Manufacturer of Harness and Dealer in general line of horse goods. Buy a Rose Harness then smile.

"When you want the best go, to FRANK A. ROUSE, the Meat Man. Pure Home Rendered Lard Always on Hand. Top market prices paid for hides, pelts, tallow and butcher stock.

"For Up-To-Date Footwear call on CB Dills, the Foot Fitter. Bakery goods always on hand. An honest shoe for an honest dollar.

"Rather handy to

I have on a rainy day - WOODRUFF BROS. BANK. CC Woodruff - MT Woodruff.

"Have you tried the New Meat Market? Everything Fresh, Clean & New. FRANK NORTON, Prop.

"Sibley Lumber Co. - Dealers in all kinds of Lumber and Coal. RB Sibley, manager.

"Attention Farmers! Plow the ground, sow the seeds, cultivate it all in needs: Harvest when the crop is ripe, put this advice right in your pipe. EE LANKTON, Farm Machinery.

"Buy your hardware here... and hit the nail on the head every time. CLAVEY & BRYA.

"Driving Distances from DeWitt: Eagle 14 miles, Gunnisonville 4 miles, Bath 8 miles, South Riley 6 miles.

"Railroad fares from DeWitt: Lansing 20 cents, St. Johns 30 cents, Bath 36 cents.

"DeWitt Mails- (Post) Office hours 7 a.m. to 8 p.m.

"Lodges - F&AM: Wednesday on or before

full moon; Eastern Star: Friday on or before full moon; Lady Macabees: Friday afternoon at 2 o'clock every other week; Odd Fellows: every other Tuesday night; Woodmen: every other Thursday night; Grange: every other Saturday night; Yeomen: Last Thursday night of every month; Rebekahs: Every other Saturday night.

"Lansing and St. Johns Electric Ry. - North Bound: 6:27, 8:27, 10:27 a.m., 12:27, 2:27, 4:27, 6:27, 9:27 p.m. South bound: 7:28, 9:28, 11:28 a.m., 1:28, 3:28, 5:28, 7:28, 10:28 p.m."

I think that about covers everything! Thanks Rosella.

Ken Coin is a resident of DeWitt and the area's primary historian.

DeWitt remembered

Bill Lonier brought out the best

By KEN COIN

With the death last week of Bill Lonier, DeWitt has lost one of its last vestiges of what a small town should really be like. In his unassuming demeanor, he brought out the best in us and our tiny corner of rural America.

I well remember my first haircut and, contrary to several barbers' claims, it was at the kitchen table with my mom's mixing bowl on my head and my dad shaving away anything that showed with some ancient electric clippers (sheep shears, I think) that my grandfather had passed our way. I'm certain I never properly thanked grandpa for sharing those clippers with us.

On my first few trips to the family barbershop, my initial humiliation of having to sit on the wooden "kiddie" board, which was placed across the arms of the chair, soon turned into terror as Bob Norris jerked and wrenched my head this way and that. "Sit up straight! Now don't move or I'll shave your ear off." I not only believed he meant it, I think he would have enjoyed it.

One day there was a new face at the second chair, and, if you're not familiar with barbershop protocol, number two barber does not get every other customer. Number two barber gets only those customers who don't have all day to wait for a turn at number one chair. (Yes, there is a third chair and once I actually witnessed a barber using it. But we won't get into that.) One by one as the old farmers said "No thanks. I'll wait for Bob!" I, on the other hand, jumped at the chance. I stood next to the new guy's chair for a moment waiting for him to put that dreaded board across the arms and he just patted the seat. "Hop on up here young fella. My name's Bill. You got a name?" I knew I had a friend for life.

I often envied Bill's job. He got to watch the whole world pass by his chair. He could observe it, comment on it, interact with it, or impact it when and how he chose, all without leaving the few square feet of space. And when the day was over - sweep up the hair and lock the door. But Bill was no ordinary barber. Aside from his responsibility as collector and distributor of valuable information, Bill was a veteran showman with enough good nature and love of people to carry it off superbly.

On a recent trip to the barbershop, I caught his act and thought at the time, what polish! What a gift! His customer was an older gentleman who, as we all soon learned, was not from DeWitt.

"So, what brings you to DeWitt?" Bill asked, tactfully.

"My wife's from here," the gentleman answers. "She's a Hawk."

"Hmmmm," Bill responded. "Likes to keep an eye on ya, does she?"

As all of us in the place were doubled over in silent amusement, the gentleman corrected the obvious confusion. "No, that was her maiden name, Hawk."

"Ohhh," Bill replied, then lit his pipe, a cue to



Bill Lonier

the rest of us to pay attention to the pro. "Well then, you must be connected to the Owl family south of town here?"

"Nnnno," said the stranger, "don't think I ever heard her speak of them."

"Hmmmm," said Bill in his most arid tone, "I thought the Hawks and the Owls were related some way." (Silent applause from the audience.)

In a town where lifelong residents can now get lost among the crowd, Bill's barbershop offered a refuge where we could feel at home. And not just because of the familiar red ashtray table or front door that doesn't open quite right, but a consistency that spanned generations.

My son, Sam, didn't want anyone but Bill touching his hair. The longer wait for the first chair was well worth it to both of us as I watched the two of them play out their parts. "How do ya want it today, Mr. Sam, like mine?" Bill would ask, pointing to his own bald head. (Giggle har-har) Then finish the job and again, hand him the mirror. "Think your girlfriend'll recognize ya?" (Giggle har-har) Then whip the talcum brush across his face! (Giggle har-har) Then stare ~~at the~~ ~~bill~~ nonchalantly across the street while he sucked about four inches of the kid's neck flesh into the hand vacuum. "Sorry there Mr. Sam." (Giggle har-har) I'd already gotten my \$7 worth and hadn't even got in the chair yet.

Time is changing everything in this community and it's good people like Bill Lonier who will be remembered and missed the most.

Ken Coin is a resident of DeWitt and the area's primary historian. His column appears here twice monthly.