

Brown County Journal

May 15, 2015

Events:

Brown County Historical
Society Dinner
June 1

Brown County
Genealogical Society
June 10

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A Gathering Together

"It's time again for the Fourteenth Annual Jesse Brown Family Reunion, a gathering of the tribe. For the past several years this good group of folk who are all descendents of Jesse and Mary Ann Brown have come from afar for a good old-fashioned pitch-in dinner. The Reunion is scheduled for a pleasant Sunday afternoon, June 7, 2015. Plan to come a little early to visit with family and swap some good stories."

This is the opening paragraph that is used every year on our family reunion newsletter. A cousin helped to put together our first newsletter and it was so fitting that it has been used ever since. Isn't that what reunions are supposed to be - a gathering of the tribe with food added to increase the appeal. What is the definition of a reunion? These definitions were found: "an instance of two or more people coming together again after a period of separation, a social gathering attended by members of a certain group of people who have not seen each other for some time." Isn't there more to it, though?



**A Bean
Dinner at the
Descendents
of William
Kelp Family
Reunion in
1972**



The 1931 Bean Dinner at Duncan

historical gatherings that occurred in or for Brown Countians, and some are still in existence today. The ones that are more well known are the Old Settlers Reunion and the Elkinsville Reunion.

Bean Dinners for the Old Soldiers

A tradition going back to the days following the Civil War continues every year in some communities. This occurring in the summer months is the old Bean Dinners which began as a reunion of veterans. Research shows that the first public mention of the bean dinner was in the 1870s.

“Those reunions reflected some of the daily aspects of the soldier’s life, including a campfire meal of pork, beans, hardtack and coffee. So many beans were cooked at these gatherings that in time these events became known as bean dinners. Known at first as reunions or ‘campfires,’ the gathering didn’t attain the label of ‘bean dinners’ until the late 1880s. As time passed, the bean dinner came to be regarded as a community reunion.” (from Mydailytribune.com “Bean Dinner Maintains Vinton Tradition”)

The Brown County Bean Dinners, or as sometimes labeled in the newspapers as Homecoming, was first began in 1890. The Jackson Woods Post No. 512 G. A. R. was a veterans group that was formed after the Civil War to benefit those veterans. G. A. R. stands for Grand Army of the Republic. The Jackson Woods Post was named for a Brown County soldier that died during the war. Although life was hard during the Civil War one aspect that was remembered and even romanticized was the

Some of my best childhood memories involved family reunions – whether they were small gatherings with local family members on the weekend or the annual event in which one had to travel to another city or state. These usually involved a lot of preparation of time, good food, and entertainment. There are other types of reunions or gatherings that are organized for other reasons. These could be anything from church groups, veterans groups, community celebrations, or school reunions. There are four



1924 Veterans - L to R: Benjamin Seibert, Ambrose Bartley, William Devers, Henry W. King, and Jerry Wilson

camaraderie that was formed between the soldiers that had to live together in the field and far away from home. These fonder memories of the war was celebrated by the forming of these veterans' reunions which grew to be very popular events following the war and continued up until the second World War. As the old civil war veterans dwindled the Bean Dinners came to honor all veterans of the following wars and even became a community event. Our Bean Dinners were always held at Duncan Church in Schooner valley. Duncan Church was established in 1887 just a few years before.

Our earliest newspaper clippings of the Bean Dinner that have survived are from 1914. At that time the Bean Dinners had been going on for 24 years. Other references found on our Bean Dinners can be found in other newspapers such as the Seymour Republican in 1901 and the Indianapolis Star in 1906. One headline read "The Annual Bean Dinner - Makes a One-Line Paragraph in the Book of the Chronicles of Jackson Woods Post G.A.R. No. 512 - And the Bean Dinner of Sept. 15, 1906, Was the Biggest Bean Dinner." It was stated that 3000 to 5000 people attended that event. There were public

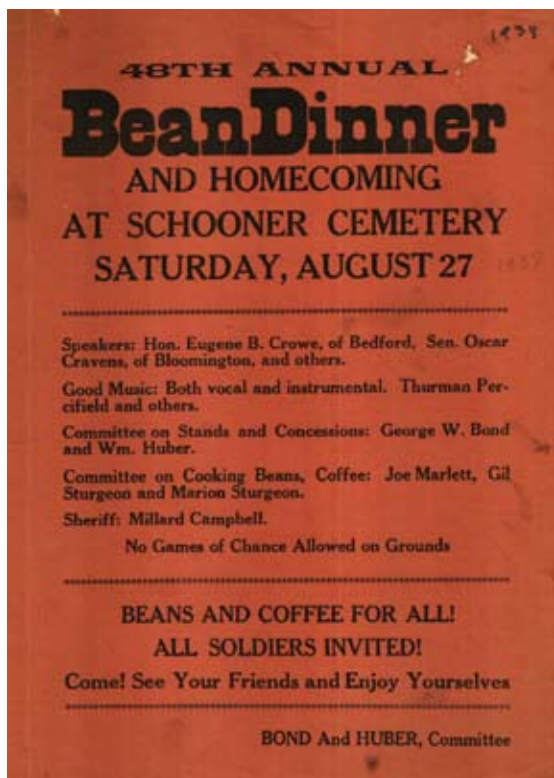
speakers, music, religious services, and a long-awaited meal for everyone. This line from the article asks a question. "What brought the people out? Just this: the masses love the Old Soldiers and are determined that while there are Veterans enough left on earth to get up a commemorative bean dinner that remnant shall be honored by the presences of their loving fellow citizens who are enjoying the benefits of the restored union of the states, so dearly bought by the expenditures of blood and treasure." Commander James M. Yoder, along with James Bond Sr. and Justus Morse, all of Jackson Woods Post, headed up the first event and kept it going for many years. (from the Hohenberger Manuscripts at Lilly Library)

Jackson Woods Post started with 40 original members and grew to have up to 120 members at one time. By the time the 1925 Bean Dinner rolled around they only had a few members left to keep the Post going. It was stated at that time the Bean Dinner had an attendance of over 1000 attendees which included old soldiers from all over Indiana, and even seven states were represented. In 1935 there was only one soldier still living in Brown County which was William Devers. There were however 51 old soldiers that registered at that dinner from other places. The 48th Annual Bean Dinner reunion in 1938 as reported in the Democrat gave an account of the amount of food that was prepared for the meal. They had 150 lbs. of beans flavored with 35 lbs. of bacon and had 20 lbs. of black coffee which all proved insufficient to feed them all.

From an article "Down in the Hills o' Brown County" written by Frank Hohenberger in the 1930s here is a short description of one event. "The Duncan school grounds, six miles west of the county seat, is the scene of many happy gatherings every year when the last Saturday of August rolls around. Thirty-five or forty years ago Elihu Wheeler, Rafe Lane, Wash Parks, Ambrose Bartley, a Mr. Huber [Gregor Huber?], a Mr. Miles [Yewell Mills], James Yoder, and Ben Seibert, Civil War veterans, started what has since been known as the bean dinner. Today as high as 500 people are in attendance arriving at sunup and remaining until dark. They come from all over. Marion Sturgeon, who has seen 72 birthdays



James M. Yoder in his Uniform



has been the official bean cooker for over 30 years. Mr. Wheeler asked him to assume the duties of cook and stick to the job as long as he could. He said that it takes from 1 1/2 to 3 bushels of beans and about 30-40 pounds of bacon. Sturgeon said it also takes 3 1/2 hours to cook the beans, but they seem to disappear sooner than that. He has made as much as 1100 gallons of coffee on the biggest day. There are usually nine kettles on the big poles when the cooking begins. Dinner is served at 12:00 and then the deck is cleared for public speaking.”

As World War 2 came to the forefront and money and resources were direly needed, the Bean Dinners came to a close. Almost all of the old soldiers were gone and attendance had dwindled with the coming of the next war. Almost everyone in Brown County can either remember the Bean Dinners or stories of them have survived the generations.

The Brown County Reunion

In the early 1900s community home-away-from-home reunions were all the rage. Whenever groups of people from one community or county would move to another place they would hold annual gatherings to keep in touch with each other and those that were left back home. One unusual mention of one of these reunions was found in an Indianapolis newspaper reporting back from former Brown County residents. The article reported that on August 10, 1912 they were celebrating their 2nd Brown County Reunion in Howard, North Dakota. It was held for all those former residents that now lived in Montana and North Dakota. They had 180 that attended the reunion and one of their special songs was ‘My Old Brown County Home Back in the Hills.’

The biggest and most well known was the Brown County Reunion that was held every year in Indianapolis. In 1915 they held their 1st Reunion at Brookside Park on a Sunday in August. They reported they were making plans for a permanent annual event at that time. Mr. J. W. Stump was the temporary chairman. The following year they decided on a permanent location that was to be in Garfield Park and it had been held there ever since. Mr. A. S. Anderson was elected President of the reunion committee. The date was decided on to be the second Sunday in August every year. All these reports came from Indianapolis and Franklin newspapers. By the 1919 reunion they had 800 in attendance. Some Brown County residents traveled the distance to attend the reunion also. Some were asked to talk on the history of Brown County.

After the 1921 reunion the newspapers had a good report. “ More than 1600 former residents and 300 residents of Brown County, their families and friends, attended the old-fashioned get-together reunion of the Brown County Reunion Association, in Garfield park, Sunday. After the characteristic Brown county habit, all came with baskets well filled with fried chicken and other good things to eat, and the whole day was given over to merry-making. The association has been in existence for more than seven years, and the annual reunion is held each year in Garfield Park on the second Sunday in August. At noon a spread of the contents of the well-filled baskets was made on a table more than 200 feet long, and each person partook heartily of the wholesome home cooking. Shortly after the dinner the



1916 Brown County Reunion at Garfield Park, Indianapolis

program consisted chiefly of speeches by residents and former residents and singing was held.” One of the speakers was Walter Waltman of Lansing, Michigan. William C. Hurdle of Bean Blossom and his daughter, Monice, sang a duet. Other family reunions were held that day in conjunction with the general reunion.

A notice on the upcoming 1923 reunion was found in an Indianapolis newspaper. “BROWN COUNTY REUNION - Many a story of a charivari held in former years way out on Howard pike or of any general festive gathering from Axiom branch to the old race track at Goshen will be retold Sunday when residents and former residents of Brown County gather at Garfield park to celebrate the annual all-day

Brown County Reunion. In keeping with the custom learned in youth when all Brown County residents were regular attendants at the annual old settlers' meeting in Waltman Grove at Georgetown or the Soldier's and Sailors Bean Dinner at the Duncan schoolhouse on Schooner 'crick', former Brown County citizens, who now live in Indianapolis, for several years have gathered annually on the second Sunday in August in reunion."

By 1924 it was reported that the Brown County Reunion was the largest reunion of all reunions that had ever been held in Garfield Park. Well over 2000 people had attended that year. Mr. A. S. Anderson stated he had been president of the reunion association for 12 years by that time. By 1929 their numbers were getting smaller, but they also had more family reunions going on at the same time. Several pioneer Brown County families that were meeting at the same time were the Percifields, Campbells, Allisons, Hoppers, Waltmans, the Crouch family, the Zodys, Hoys, and Watts families. By 1931 their numbers were lower still, but with 600 still in attendance. By 1935 Charles A. Neidigh became President and by 1948 a Mr. L. T. Glidden became President.

It is not known exactly when the Brown County Reunion ceased to exist, but it had gone on for over 35 years by 1950. All that we have left of this great event is a large photograph taken of the Brown County Reunion attendees. This now hangs on the wall of the History Center with the names of almost every individual written on the back. If anyone has any memorabilia from this event please contact the Brown County Historical Society Archives.



A photo from the 1916 Brown County Reunion in the History Center

(Photos from the Historical Society Archives, Lilly Library Hohenberger Collection, and Jim Kelp)