

The Newcomer

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The Passing of the 1861 Courthouse

Edited by John J. Yost

The headline on the *Newton County Enterprise* in its Nov. 8, 1906 number proclaimed, "The Passing of Newton County's Celebrated Pre-Historic Court House." It was 90 years ago that the building which had served for a half-century as the focal point of political and governmental activities met its fate. *The Newcomer* can do on better than the press of the day did in telling the story.

"Newton County's historic old court house was knocked down under the auctioneer's hammer Monday afternoon, and is now the property of John Simons. At three o'clock a couple hundred or more people, attracted principally through curiosity, assembled around the old building and listened to the sonorous solo of Col. J. U. Wildasin as he sang out the virtues of the prehistoric collection that had been placed at his disposal for sale.

"The venerable John Ade, first Recorder of Newton County, stood silently in the background. He had slipped away from the bank a few minutes to take another look at the old building before it was stripped of its erstwhile dignity, but as the hammer fell, Mr. Ade and his memory of a half century of local history turned away from the crowd. He is the last survivor of the corps of officers that first served the county in the



This frame Courthouse and office building were sold 90 years ago. The bell in the cupola shook the building when it rang to announce the opening of court sessions.

building now hoary with age and relegated to private life.

"And there were others on the grounds who, in later years, received chilblains and censure as part pay for their services as county officials. John Randall and John Ulery, both of Washington, mingled among the crowd, but they had seen too much of the old building to venture a bid. Jira Skinner and John Wildasin, former Sheriffs; John Higgins and George Bridgeman, former Recorders; Isaac Smart, ex-Treasurer; former Auditor Schuyler Jones, and ex-Clerk Ira Drake stood by as spectators. Cold hearted world, not a tear was shed by one of them as their old friend was torn ruthlessly away and tossed into the wreckage pile.

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"And then there was Dr. Jethro Hatch who had led the grand march at the dedicatory ball held in the court room when the building was "new and stately." Only the dignity of mature years kept the doctor from tripping off a few steps Monday as he saw the finish of the old shack.

"But besides these there were others there who coveted the rich treasures and had come prepared to plank down hard cash to gain their possessions.

"The sale commenced, and there is where Col. Wildasin lost his reputation for truth and veracity, but established a reputation for making sales. He started in on the microbe-splattered linoleum that covered the floors, and the poetic appeal the Colonel

put up about those decorative floor coverings would have made a South Carolina Democrat turn green with envy. But his gilded talk started a stampede and before the linoleum had all been disposed of Newton County was some \$36.00 to the good. Then came stoves, safes, book cases, chairs, and other bric-a-brac that brought good prices.

"Bidding on the Court House proper was not overly spirited, and after a few calls were made, the building was saddled onto John Simons for \$170.00. A reporter of the *Enterprise* inquired of Mr. Simons what he proposed to do with the building, but he acted much like a man with a white elephant on his hands, and grew strangely glum. Mr. Simons also bid in the office building formerly occupied by the Clerk and Recorder and will remove the same to his farm east of town and transform it into a cottage for his tenant.

"The coal house, the best building on the grounds, went to William Dowling for an even hundred, and the brick vaults were bid in by Charles Hatch for \$32. The proceeds of the sale netted \$556.50."

John Ade in his *Newton County 1853-1911* gives us this additional information about this court house. "On April 15, 1861... the contract was let to John B. Chesebrough for the sum of \$974. Afterward they made an additional contract with him to erect a protico over the east door of the said building for the sum of \$26, making the total cost of the house, when completed, \$1,000. This was



JOHN ADE



J. U. WILDASIN

at least one instance in which a court house was built within the limits of the first appropriation.

John Ade cites the following item of the minutes of the Newton County Commissioners. "June 3, 1861. Commissioners met. Present William Russell, Michael Coffelt, and Thomas R. Barker. Elijah Shriver, sheriff,

declared the (commissioners') court in session. Whereupon it was, on motion, ordered that we do now adjourn to meet in the court room of the new court house, erected on block 16, in the town of Kent."

Ade continues his narrative. "This building was a plain, frame structure with the court room and two jury rooms above and four offices below. The lower rooms were

appropriated by the clerk and auditor on the south side of the building, and by the treasurer and recorder on the north side.

"This arrangement continued until 1867, when the small building, located north of the court house, was erected, containing two rooms. When first built, it was the intention to use these rooms as jury rooms. However, objections were raised on account of their being on the ground floor. Being abandoned for that purpose, the clerk soon after appropriated the west room, the recorder taking the east one. The auditor's office was then enlarged by taking all the south side of the court house on the first floor. The sheriff then took possession of the room deserted by the recorder, this being the first time he had been able to secure a separate office.

"This arrangement continued until August, 1906, when the new and present court house was completed. The old building was abandoned after continuous use of 45 years, and was on Nov. 6, 1906, sold to John Simons for the sum of \$170. The original cost had been \$1,000. Deducting the amount for which it sold, made the real cost to the county only \$830 for 45 years' service, or an annual rental of \$18.50 a year. I doubt if any other county in the state can show such an illustration of economy."

And so, the old Courthouse passed into history. In

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Focus on the Family Division

Charles Swanson

There was quite a Swedish settlement west of Morocco along the state line. Byron Sandberg supplied the following article on his grandfather Charles Swanson.
-Gerald Born

By Byron Sandberg

My grandfather Charles Swanson won the John Grant Award for Frugality and Industry. Mr. Grant lent grandfather the high risk part of the loan for his farm, the part the bank wouldn't cover. Mr. Grant figured grandfather was a good risk because he had seen him move up the ladder from one tenant farm to another and because grandfather was an immigrant from Smoland, Sweden, like himself. Those not frugal and industrious in Smoland risked death from starvation. It bothered my aunts that Mr. Grant came over regularly to make sure his investment was not being dissipated by high or slothful living. He was not disappointed. The first thing grandfather did was to take out the windmill-powered water system and replace it with a bucket on a stool. It was a good decision because it saved repair money and the bucket doubled as a fire extinguisher when the Christmas tree caught on fire from the candles.

Grandfather and Uncle Ernest farmed 340 acres while they were paying for the farm. I don't see how they did it. When I was a boy, the equipment was still around and it included a two-bottom gang plow, a one-bottom sulkey plow and one-row cultivators, etc.

Aunt Etta and Olga were good cooks. There was never any shortage of food, and it didn't cost any money. All they needed was the garden plowed and chicken feed. What the garden didn't raise, they traded eggs for on Saturday night. The Swedes all went to Morocco on Saturday night so they could save time and gas by getting the news, doing their visiting and trading all at once. The latest news came over the party line. Elida Johnson had two phones so she could "rubber" on both the Indiana and Illinois Swedes. With all the latest news, Elida was a very important lady in the Swede community. Everybody had his own personal ring on the party line that he generated by cranking the phone. That saved the telephone batteries. Six shorts was the emergency ring, and then everybody could talk. For all other ring, the proper etiquette was to hold the hand over the phone so talking parties could not hear your breathing or otherwise know you were listening. I used to click the phone like I had hung up and then count the other parties hanging up. It was kind of a popularity poll.

An Irish American couldn't understand why the Old Swedes kept threshing oats after others started using combines. If he had complained to an Old Swede about that, he would have discovered that: "Your Time Is Not Worth Anything." Considering this fact, it is not logical that they also valued work efficiency. If you did not hold the

hammer efficiently at the end of the handle, you were told: "You hammer like an old lady." Putting this together, I come up with two different theories of Old Swede farming: (1) Hand work is higher quality than machine work and quality is more important than cost and efficiency. (2) Inefficient work is superior to efficient work when there is not enough work to keep everyone out of mischief and from spending money. Both theories explain why my father would pick all the corn he could by hand before he would let me use the tractor cornpicker at Thanksgiving school vacation.

My aunts started me out in my work life mowing lawns with a push mower and weeding gardens for a dollar a day. Then they taught me to put most of the money into savings instead of squandering it on ice cream cones. It is a shame that more of this old Swede culture did not rub off on the grandson who went into politics and drives a Mercedes Benz. This grandson has a buddy who awarded a million dollar grant for producing just 300 votes. Grandfather would have a tough time understanding that.

The Old Swede culture died because they were mostly brothers and sisters living together. One of these old bachelors warned me women were starting to get divorces that cost money. They probably also figured out that even the Old Swede women complained after they got married. My aunts never complained, but my mother sure did and I was told that my grandmother did. It was so peaceful at my aunt's house.

Society Notes

McCray Scholar: The 1996 McCray Scholarship winner was Heather McFarlane, a senior at South Newton High School. She is the daughter of Sarah McFarlane of Goodland, and she plans to study Physical Therapy at Indiana State University. Her winning essay was on the history of Beaver Lake.

Inquiry: David Kindem of Grand Haven, MI has written to inquire about information concerning the family of William Carrier and Roene Miller, whom he believes to have lived in Newton County during the 1860's and 70's. Anyone having information which might be helpful to him is invited to contact him at 1713 Dykhouse, Grand Haven, MI 49417; (616) 842-7742; e-mail address: dkindem@novagate.com.

Meeting notes: Because the June meeting will be a special "road trip" to Beaverville, IL for a program arranged by Judge Robert B. Smart on the French settlement there, the annual membership meeting and carry-in dinner will be moved to *(Continued to Page Four)*

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studying that first Courthouse it is interesting to note that it played a role in the ultimate resolution of the county seat issue. Since the 1880's the Newton County Commissioners had been desirous of building a more permanent Courthouse, but the on-going legal and political wrangling which surrounded the question of the location of the county seat had prevented the county from replacing it with a permanent structure. The last round of the county seat dispute took place over a four-year period from 1900 to 1904. When the Supreme Court handed down its decision in the county seat litigation, the high court addressed the badly deteriorated condition of the 1861-vintage Courthouse observing that the entire building shook when the bell on the building's roof tolled to announce the opening of court sessions.

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to the July meeting. Members should watch their meeting notice cards for further details.

Dues: July 1 marks the beginning of a new club year, which means that dues are once again due. You may send your dues to: Mrs. Richard L. Miller, Treasurer, 12060 S. Pun'kin Vine Road, Kentland, IN 47951. Dues may also be paid at the July membership dinner. Consider signing up a friend with a gift membership.

Officers: The beginning of a new club year also means it is time for election of officers. We need new officers to keep going, so if you are interested please contact one of the officers listed to the right.

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Membership dues to the Newton County Historical Society are annual from July 1 to June 30, and are structured as follows: Student, \$2.00; Individual, \$5.00; Family, \$8.00; Institutional, \$25.00; Contributing, \$50.00; Individual Life, \$100; Family Life, \$125.

Membership includes receiving the quarterly issues of *The Newcomer*. Meetings are held on the fourth Monday of each month. Officers of the Newton County Historical Society are: President, John J. Yost; Vice President, Sue Humphrey; Secretary, Robert Williamson; and Treasurer, Janet Miller.

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