

Bainbridge Township Historical Society Newsletter

Volume 4, Issue 2

Bainbridge Township, Ohio, 44023

Spring 2009

A BRIEF HISTORY OF A BARN



1956—Gambling Hall

Since we are reminiscing about the acquisition in 1957 of the home for the newly chartered Valley Presbyterian Church, I think it might be interesting to relate a few historical details about the barn that was the centerpiece of the real estate property.

After all, the new church was originally known as the “church in the barn,” and we ought to be respectfully informed about the whole life of the barn.

This little story is told from the perspective of a boy who was five years old when that barn came into being, and therefore the account is subject to possible challenge to its accuracy because its present-day hasty formulation is not supported by any serious documentary research.

Picture Bainbridge Township, a typical Ohio township in 1923. There were no paved roads in the township except for one lane of U.S. 422 paved with brick which was known then (as it is now) as East Washington Street, but more commonly called Main Market Road. The direct road from Chagrin Falls to Bainbridge Center correctly known



Converted to Church in 1958 and 2009 now used for class rooms

today as the Chagrin Road was loosely called Bainbridge Road by those who lived on it. This road was one of several principal roads in the township. Of course, the principal road was Main Market, the eastward artery from Chagrin Falls. Another principal thoroughfare was Chillicothe Road, the southward artery from Lake County toward Columbus.

John Wright had a farm and sugar bush on several hundred acres between Chagrin and Chillicothe roads that terminated at their intersection in Bainbridge Center. Along with farming, Wright transported the children on Chagrin Road to and from the Bainbridge School, a typical two story, seven-room Western Reserve school house located about where the fire house is now situated. School route drivers were called “kid hack drivers.” A team of two horses pulled a Conestoga type, high wheeled wagon in spring and autumn and a sledge or sleigh in winter.

Your storyteller lived on Chagrin Road 3-1/2 miles

north of Bainbridge Center and only ½ mile south of the square in Chagrin Falls, so John Wright was my hack driver.

In 1923, John Wright had just finished building a new barn, probably the most modern in the county at that time. The barn was known to have a fine loft which came to be used as a basketball court for the school until other facilities became available; and at one point during the Depression, it was used as a roller skating rink because it had such a fine hardwood floor in the loft.

Within a couple of years, Wright sold his farm and moved away. His property was acquired by a Cleveland group who turned the barn into a gambling casino. I remember hearing "Himmelstein" as the name of the kingpin. This was the "roaring twenties" -- the period in the life of the barn when it really was a gambling hall.

Early every Sunday afternoon, a parade of big expensive limousines would pass through Chagrin Falls from Cleveland and trek out Chagrin Road to Bainbridge Center and the barn. Then in the late evening, the parade would be reversed as the gamblers returned to Cleveland. The Sheriff made a few raids but the gambling continued for several years. Because Chagrin Road became practically impassable to automobiles in bad weather, the gambling interests paid the township to pave the road; and for years, it was the only paved road in the township besides Main Market. Chagrin Road had the first school bus in the township.

After World War II, the farm was acquired by Louis Rothkopf who owned a gambling casino in Las Vegas. He renovated the farmhouse for his family residence where he lived with his wife Blanche -- the couple had no children. At the same time, Rothkopf remodeled the barn into a recreational club for the croupiers of his Las Vegas casino. Any gambling that took place there had to be on a small scale, apparently within the scope of the club personnel, since there was no traffic to indicate a large operation like that previously run by Himmelstein. Rothkopf was investigated by U.S. Senator Estes Kefauver's Committee on Organized Crime but was not indicted.

Mrs. Rothkopf was bedridden with severe arthritis.

In 1953, I visited the couple in connection with an effort by Bainbridge Community Church to raise funds for a building expansion program through issuance of notes. Mr. Rothkopf would not accept a note but made a gift of \$1,000. In this way, I came to know the Rothkopfs somewhat socially, so I can say with conviction that Louis Rothkopf was recognized as a good citizen of Bainbridge -- certainly not an undesirable influence in our community. Mrs. Rothkopf confided in me that she was greatly troubled by her husband's Las Vegas business affairs. Whether because of this or for health reasons, she finally took her own life. Her husband joined her in death a year or so later. His body was found on the property asphyxiated in his car, and his death was ruled a suicide. Thus the Rothkopf real estate in Bainbridge came to be liquidated circa 1957. (This is the end of Mr. Stanek's narrative).

Geauga County records indicate that this property at the northwest corner of Route 306 and Chagrin Road had a rather checkered and somewhat mystifying history. It was acquired by Grace Wright late in 1916 and transferred to Grace Thompson in early 1925, and the records further indicate a deed from Grace Wright to George Himmelstein on July 7, 1927. How two deeds from Grace Wright could exist at the same time is part of the mystery, and a search failed to reveal a deed from Himmelstein to any subsequent owner, which is another part of the mystery.

There is no mystery, however, about Himmelstein's activities. He transformed the house and large barn into a "social and recreational" facility called The Maple Leaf Country Club but commonly known as Himmelstein's club. He also brought into the township the first commercial electricity by paying for a line from Chagrin Falls to his property.

Almost everyone, including the sheriff no doubt, knew what was going on at the club. The wide open gambling, easily available bootleg liquor and other "social activities" brought the gambling fraternity from Cleveland and elsewhere. Dressed in evening clothes, the gamblers and their ladies arrived in large, expensive cars and lost their money to Himmelstein. Under great pressure, the sheriff finally closed the club.

To add to the mystery noted above, apparently Grace Thompson somehow re-established her ownership because she sold the property to Nora Gaylord. Subsequent owners were Myrtle Larsen, Blanche Rothkopf, Louis Rothkopf; and since October 1957, the Valley Presbyterian Church. This last transfer offers a study in extreme contrasts.

Louis Rothkopf, also known as Lou Rhodie, was believed to be active in Cleveland racketeering circles. He is said to have spent thousands upon thousands of dollars remodeling the former Larsen barn into a plush gambling club with game rooms, gymnasium, steam bath, sauna, private rooms, bar, kitchen and dining facilities. The big cars appeared again but not nearly as many as had come to Himmelstein's. It was rumored that "Lou's place" was a private sanctuary for the big-time gamblers and high rollers who played for top stakes.

Blanche Rothkopf, in whose name the deed was recorded in July of 1948, died in 1957. Not long afterwards, Louis Rothkopf was found dead in his car with the motor running -- an apparent suicide, but no autopsy was performed. Questions arose as to whether this was really a suicide, but answers were never forthcoming.

The Valley Presbyterian Church came into being the result of a minister at Bainbridge Community Church speaking on spiritualism led to a split on membership. The members that left met in homes and the school until they organized and joined the Fairmont Presbyterian church and then split off and purchased the Rothkopf property. The 36-acre property was acquired by the Church in October, 1957; and by another metamorphosis, the buildings were transformed from a gambling casino into a House of God. Some of the land was sold to home builders and commercial enterprises, and a number of additions were made to the church buildings.

Cecil, the Larsen's big black bull and Wee Willie Winkie, their donkey with the loudest voice in Bainbridge, would never recognize their old homestead -- and that's no mystery.

Information from "A Brief History of a Barn" by *Frank C. Stanek* – 20 Sept. 1996 and *Cleveland Pictorial* 1958, *Edited by Harriet Novy*



Rev. Bradford Pusey at the Pulpit when the church opened in 1958



Same view 2009 and now used for class room



Class for kindergarten is held by Lenore Dickerson (left) and Marcia Wannamaker teachers. Note tiled walls. This was from the original barn and the same today in the downstairs of the barn.



Valley Presbyterian Church today. New church on left with offices to the right connecting to social hall. The top of the old church/gambling hall can be seen on the right behind the church offices. Photo April 2009



Choir practice in the garage of the old church. This was on the south end of the barn.

A special thanks to Lois Little and Janet Novak our Refreshment Chairman for doing a great job this past season keeping us supplied with goodies at our meetings. All the hostesses did a great job and we applaud you.

Remember when the sheet comes around be sure to volunteer and sign the sheet. That includes men to and not just the ladies.

CONSORTIUM OF HISTORICAL SOCIETIES

On Saturday, April 25, 2009, the Chagrin Valley Consortium of Historical Societies met at the Chesterland Historical Village located on the northwest corner of Mayfield and Caves Roads. Historical societies mainly from eastern Cuyahoga County and western Geauga attended this productive meeting. Each group reported current projects, fund raising events, notable speakers and organizations of interest as well as challenging situations and suggestions. Afterwards members visited the new Thayer store that was originally situated next to Bloom Brothers on Mayfield Road where the interurban Scotland Station was located many years ago. That station building and a section of tracks also can be seen at Chesterland's Historical Village.

The next Consortium meeting will be at Mayfield Township's Historical Society at 606 S.O.M. Center Road in Mayfield Village on October 17th, and all historical groups are welcome.

Harriet Novy

Officers 2009

President
Karl Kuckelheim

**Vice President
&
Program Chairman**
Donna Yuse
543-3199

Secretary
Harriet Novy

Treasurer
Shirley Takacs

Membership Chairman
Marge Cook
440-338-5375

Editor & Publisher
Bill Takacs
440-543-4991

Meetings of the Bainbridge Township Historical Society are held the second Wednesday of the month (September through June) at 7:30 p.m. in the Burns-Lindow Building at the corner of Route 306 and Bainbridge-Solon Road.

**Bainbridge Township Historical Society
P.O.Box 23363
Bainbridge Township
OH 44023-0363**



Town Hall—Circa 1914
Now—Burns Lindow Bldg

Message from our President

Don't let the future pass you by...

The Bainbridge Township Historical Society is looking for the next generation of volunteers to help us preserve our community's vast and interesting past. Every year we are losing precious time to spend with our senior generation, gifted with the knowledge and memories of Bainbridge's rich heritage. They hold the key to open the door to our past. We all need to do our share to help preserve this priceless information for all future generations. We only have one past, let's not lose it...

Karl F. Kuckelheim
President

If have an interest in volunteering your time or to share information (Photos, Information, Antiques and Memorabilia). Please contact us...

Bainbridge Township Historical Society
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www.bainbridgemory.org

A big "thank you" to Donna Braun and Dick and Julia Newton for providing refreshments at our March meeting and to Marjorie Cook and Mildred MacRitchie for co-hosting April's meeting.

Welcome new members: Lynne Charney, Mark Cleaver, John Kluchar, Vera Kuckelheim, Frank Lanza, Matt Lynch*, Susan McLaughlin, Corey Randall, Karen Sprague, Clyde Whaley and Linda White*. *Asterisk indicate lifetime member

**Please—We are looking for more pictures and articles on Bainbridge Township History.
Bill Takacs— 440-543-4991**

* **Just a Reminder— Annual dues are Payable in September but no later than December-\$10.00 for singles, \$20.00 for family. Life Membership-\$100.00. Make checks payable to *Bainbridge Township Historical Society*. Pay Marge Cook at the meeting or mail to her at 116 Leaview Ln., Chagrin Falls, OH 44022.** *

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P.O.Box 23363
Bainbridge Twp.OH 44023-0363

ADDRESS SERVICE REQUESTED

DATED MATERIAL – PLEASE DELIVER PROMPTLY

2009 Meeting Schedule

May 13th, 2009: Firemen's Museum and what is there.

June 10th, 2009: Our annual picnic will be at the Pavilion, Centerville Mills at 6:30 P.M.. Bring dish to pass and place settings.

July & August: No Meetings—Watch for our next newsletter for our fall program schedule.

September 9th, 2009: To be announced

Check out our web page www.bainbridgemory.org