

Harrison Heritage News

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The "Widow Sparks" Mystery

Phillip Naff

A few months ago, George Jacobs, publisher of *The Cynthiana Democrat*, was invited to address the membership of the Harrison County Historical Society. He reminisced about his tenure of many decades at the *Democrat*, and several in the audience chimed in about their own memories of having worked for the *Democrat* or *The Log Cabin* over the years. Mr. Jacobs recalled that the best-selling editions of his time with the paper was during the paper's coverage of the 1997 floods, and most recently, the filming of *Home Makeover* in the county. The discussion reminded me of another period when the local papers must certainly have set some all-time sales records for their era. The years were 1918 and 1936 when, despite his worst efforts, a local boy did his unintentional best to keep the presses rolling at the *Democrat* and *Log Cabin*. He wasn't a publisher, reporter, pressman, or even a newspaper boy. His name was Heber Luther Hicks and you might say his business was, well, . . . murder!

Prelude to Murder

Although descended from well-established northern Harrison County families from the neighborhoods of Kelat, Conrey,



Heber Luther Hicks. Photo, 1936, from unidentified Cincinnati newspaper clipping, Shearle Hicks scrapbook.

and Antioch Mills, Heber Hicks was not a Harrison County native himself. Raised in Kelat and Cynthiana, he was actually born in Pennsylvania, apparently during a time when his father, Jacob Hicks (1869-1953), worked as a traveling salesman for the Reed Manufacturing Company of Kalamazoo, Michigan. Jake sold cultivators, first as an agent for the company, and then, realizing a good bit of success, he later bought the farm equipment wholesale and sold for his own account. At first he traveled all over Pennsylvania, New York and Virginia as a salesman for

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President's Corner

Bob Owen

At last month's meeting, we discussed and voted on changes to the by-laws, constitution and articles of incorporation. The following week, I was able to contact the Kentucky Department of State and was able to verify that the Society is duly chartered as a non-profit organization in good standing. Discussions with the representative indicates that while we can amend our articles of incorporation, it is a laborious process. They recommended we try to limit our changes to the by-laws which really govern how the society is run.

Based on that recommendation, I went back and moved any changes to the articles of incorporation into the by-laws. Most of the changes in the articles were cosmetic in nature and easily moved. We will have to vote on these recent changes at the next meeting.

Don't forget that the next meeting will be at the Handy House on Oddville Avenue. This is an excellent opportunity to see the structure of this old house. Also plan to attend the November meeting when Philip Naff will do a Harrison Co. Genealogy workshop. This should be very informative. Philip will also try to get Janie Whitehead and Charley Feix to contribute also. Be sure and put this on your calendar and bring others to hear it.

Harrison County Historical Society

Bob Owen, President
Billy Fowler, Vice President
Janie Whitehead, Secretary
Dorothy Slade, Treasurer

Notes from meeting of July 20, 2006:

President Bob Owen again encouraged all members to also become members of the Kentucky Historical Society. He read a list of that organization's events that will be held in August. A group called "Cafe" has formed and is working on the arts in Harrison Co. They are currently working with the Opera House.

A group of the Civil War re-enactors addressed the society asking for ideas to instill community support in upcoming years to make the Battle of Cynthiana a major event .

Martha Barnes announced the museum's 12th anniversary celebration July 21 & 22.

The membership approved in a resolution updates to the by-laws etc. Bob Owen has since learned that a couple of minor language changes could cause legal issues. He will therefore request a vote to change those things back as they were. None of the changes will affect the way the society operates. (See President's Corner).

Submitted by Billy Fowler.

Upcoming Harrison County Historical Society Programs

August 17- Meeting at the Handy House, including update on status of the building and tours by Mr. and Mrs. Billy Fowler.

September 21 - Marsha Hicks of The Colonial Dames XVII Century.

October 19 - A representative from Friends of Griffith Woods will discuss the planned activities of this support group, and present an update on the preservation plans for Griffith Tavern.

November 16—Workshop on Harrison County Genealogy—Phillip Naff with others to be announced.

Cynthiana-Harrison County Museum

Hrs: 10-5 Fri-Sat
Martha Barnes, President

Thanks to all who were a part of our Cynthiana-Harrison County Museum's 12th anniversary celebration. Special thanks to those who came early and stayed late, those who assisted with breakfast, those who took pictures, those who provided publicity, and those who continue to demonstrate their support and appreciation for our endeavors. The museum's catalog of our collection contains 2000+ items. This indeed indicates the interest of our community in preserving and sharing our history.

In our reflections of the museum's beginnings, it is interesting to consider those first objects donated and the persons who were supportive from the "get-go." Item number one in the museum collection is an iron grate poker with plaited handle which was fashioned by brothers Bill and Joe Wohlwinder. Did you catch the words "plaited handle" - a utilitarian work of art! Cecil Wohlwinder gave this first article to the museum.

The late George Slade and Hallie and Jim Bob Martin truly were instrumental in the establishment of the museum. How we miss those dear friends! Many of the objects in the museum were provided by them, especially as we set up our very first displays in 1994. George provided items numbered two, four, five, seven, etc.etc. Number 2 is a large broad axe made by William E. Slade who operated a combination blacksmith shop, foundry, and machine shop in Cynthiana from 1875 to 1901. The label on this axe informs the reader that William Slade was murdered in his Bridge Street home. No arrest was made. The museum staff always has taken pride in its efforts to make the labels most explanatory - to make that local connection - to enable visitors to take the self-guided tour if they wish.)

A short shaft tobacco knife is number four. Did we realize how historical it would be? Five is a Dietz "Little Wizard" coal oil lamp, perhaps used as a warning light on the railroad. A miniature reproduction of a coal and wood range bears the number 7. Among Jim Bob and Hallie Martin's many, many contributions, some of the first were chairs from the schoolhouse of Fannie and Mattie Zoller (located on Walnut Street), #13-14. To enhance our initial museum offerings, the Martins also donated a spice container from the Desha family, miniature reproduction of pot belly stove, a scraper to remove hog bristles, a gamboling stick, shoe lasts, an auger, a froe, policeman's night stick, advertisement from Martin and Gooding plumbing, flax heckle, and an iron trivet for fireplace (#15 - #25).

As a part of the collection's first twenty-five relics, Mrs. John A. Bailey contributed number three which is a hand bluegrass seed stripper. Article eleven is a bottle embossed "T.B. Smith-Kidney Tonic-Cynthiana Ky." Robert E. Wilson contributed the bottle. Object numbered twelve is an unusual large telephone from Buddy Sosbe. The late Ben C. Fritz was one of those fine folks who said, "If we had a museum, I would contribute this and this..." Mr. Ben gave numbers eight, nine, and ten. They are a hay knife or saw, a cradle scythe, and a buck saw - wonderful representations of our agrarian society. Now, dear readers, can you identify these twenty-five items and describe how they were used in the early days of Cynthiana and Harrison County - could you explain them to your children or grandchildren? These objects are just a sampling of the displays in our local museum. Come see us, continue to support us.

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Reed, returning to his home in Kelat with his wife, Effie (1877-1950), and young son for the winters. Later he rode the rural roads through Kentucky and Indiana in a wagon selling equipment to farmers in a time "before the days of trucks and pleasure cars." He, Effie, & Heber were constantly on the go, and so it was not an easy life for the small family. Jake recalled that Effie tired of "boarding with our boy, first one night with this farmer and the next with another." He eventually promised to return to Harrison County where he bought a "beautiful home" for her in Cynthiana, in the Belmont neighborhood.

Jake reminisced that he once had "\$54,000 saved up and owned an eight room house" and that "everything was fine." Then, when his supplier went out of business, the situation took a turn for the worse. His own business went to ruin and he started to drink. Then he and his wife separated. The 1910 U.S. Census records the separate residences of the Hicks family, with Jake Hicks living with his mother in Harrison County, and of Effie, who had Heber with her at the time when she was living with her brother in Covington.

Newspaper clippings from Harrison County papers of the 1910s report some narrow scrapes for father and son. A curious incident was reported in Berry when Jake Hicks made the papers in the winter of 1913. Jake Hicks was in Berry and had just stepped out of the Bluegrass Mercantile on Main Street, when shots were fired at him by Edgar Hutton. A chase ensued, with Hutton targeting Hicks as he ran through town, but not a single shot made its mark. Hutton nearly emptied his gun, but quickly surrendered to a nearby bank teller after he finished. Neither Hutton nor Hicks would say what all the shooting was about.

A few years earlier, in 1910, Heber, who stayed with his father in Harrison County, made what was perhaps his first appearance in newsprint when he nearly drowned while skating on the Licking River near Rocky Shore at Cynthiana. Heber was skating with McCauley Osborne, son of Judge J.J. Osborne, when the ice broke open and McCauley fell into the icy water beneath. Heber ran to the rescue, but the current was

too swift for them, and neither could get any traction on the ice. Harold Ingles, who, later in life was a popular teacher, band director, and coach at Cynthiana High, was nearby and able to get close enough to extend his shinny stick to them, allowing them to catch hold when they were drawn to safety.

It was reported that Heber "didn't go very far in school" but "it was because he didn't want to." So Heber quit when he was about fifteen (Harold Slade has a Cynthiana City School class photo, ca. 1913, of Heber Hicks with other schoolchildren, including his father, Rupert Slade). When Heber was seventeen he and some other Cynthiana boys ran away to Detroit in the summer, where they worked as bellboys at a large hotel. One by one the other boys returned, but his father noted that "the bright lights fascinated Heber," and that "he wasn't satisfied" when he returned to Kentucky. And so in 1917, Jake took his son, "who was getting smart in the ways of life," to work with him in his cultivator business in Western Kentucky, first to Owensboro, then Henderson, finally settling down in September in the small coal mining town of Clay, in Webster County.

The Mystery Unfolds

The night of January 21, 1918, was an eventful one in and for Harrison County. That night Cynthiana High School caught fire and the glow in the night sky could be seen from neighboring communities. Indeed, residents of Paris telephoned wanting to know if the whole town was on fire. No one died in the fire in Cynthiana. However, on that same night in far off Webster county unbeknownst to all but two, when all the world's attention was on the far off events and bloodletting of World War I, a murder was taking place. Two gunshots lit up the scene in the icy cold night of one of the worst winters on record. The heavy blanket of snow muffled the shots and the scream. The body was hidden. A woman went missing.

Ten days later a large trunk was delivered off of the express train at Lair Station. It was addressed to Harvey Rogers, an employee of the Hunter Distillery at Lair. Harvey knew who had sent it, but as they were

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not on particularly close terms, he did not know why the trunk would be sent to him. The trunk clearly wasn't empty, but he didn't open it, awaiting some explanation of it.

A few days later a rather dapper young man brought in a ruby ring and a diamond to be reset at Chas. Rieckel Co., a jewelry store in downtown Cynthiana. He wanted them fixed up for his sweetheart, whom he had promised to marry in just a couple of years.

Jake Hicks, who had been in Cynthiana since the 17th, returned to Clay on the 30th. He had left his son behind to take care of the business, and needed to return to help in the search for Joy Vance Sparks, a young widow of his "acquaintance" and mother of two, who had been missing since the night of the 21st.

Then the news hit the papers. Jake Hicks was under arrest, and on a charge of murder! He and a "colored" employee at the Hicks stables named Jim Logan were taken to Henderson and held. The Cynthiana police were notified to arrest Heber Hicks and bring him to Clay. Those in Cynthiana weren't sure if the message was correct, but it seemed that young Heber was wanted for murder, too, but they couldn't be sure, as the message was relayed by phone. They did as requested, and Officer Miley accompanied Heber and his mother to Clay.

When Jake Hicks returned to Clay on the 30th, it was to help search for the "Widow Sparks," with whom he had been having an affair since the earliest days after his arrival in September. Being a relative newcomer, and

looking a bit younger than his actual age, he passed off young Heber as his brother, a ruse which only worked for a short while, but which may have helped to attract the attentions of Joy Sparks. Jake had fallen in love with the young widow, who was hardly much older than his son, and he was successful in hiding it from his wife in Cynthiana for quite a while. But Heber didn't approve of the way his father was spending all of his time with the young woman, and fretted over the welfare of his mother, who was keeping house in Cynthiana and who was not wise to the affair . . . at least this one.

When Jake returned to Clay, his search for Ms. Sparks took him as far away as Louisville, Evansville, and even to St. Louis. But she was not to be found. He had noticed earlier in the week that Logan had seemed a little nervous about the situation over the missing woman and decided to give his hired hand the "third degree." Logan broke down and told the part of the story he was most familiar with. He had been there at the Hicks stables on the 21st when Heber asked that a buggy be hitched up for a departure late that night. He was there when Heber came back at 4 AM in the morning with little explanation, except to tell Logan not to look inside the acetylene tank located in the stables. It was clear he had something hidden in there. Logan was there the next day

when Heber asked Logan and another man to help to dig a hole under the floorboards of the stable office, presumably to hide some illegal government whiskey which Heber said was in the tank. They dug the hole and came back later after Heber had buried his illicit liquor to help cover it up and put the boards back in place.

When pressed by Jake Hicks, Logan let loose with all he saw and had learned. It turned out that Heber needed some help for the next stages in the murder plot, and had told Logan that the Joy Sparks had been killed. He needed Logan to make it look as if she were still alive to her family, and wanted to make it to appear as if she had run away from home, ostensibly with Jake Hicks, and that she needed her belongings, those in the trunk. The trunk was picked up by Logan from the widow's family. Hicks burned most of the contents, giving some to Logan for his wife, and shipped the trunk to Lair, with just a woman's handkerchief and a lump of coal inside. When Logan told of his knowledge of the plot, and of the hole he helped to dig in the stable, suspicion immediately fell upon him. With the subsequent discovery of the widow's corpse in the stables, the police had three suspects in jail, Jake, Heber, and Jim Logan.

Hicks then made his own confession, but told that Logan did the killing at his request. The confession was reprinted in its entirety in *The Cynthiana Democrat*

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and the paper was sold out. The paper noted that "every copy of the paper was eagerly purchased and after disposing of a large number of extras the people insisted on having spoiled and ragged copies and all those that are usually consigned to the paper baler." Not even a copy was left to be microfilmed for the readers of today!

Logan had helped to cover for Heber when Jake Hicks returned to Clay on the 30th, and so now that when he told of his suspicions about the hole and his knowledge of what Heber had told him, he became the prime suspect. It was once said of Heber that "one would look in vain for any trace of criminal expression on his face" and for the law enforcement officials of the time, they found it easier to put the blame on the African American, but his story could not be broken.

The Final Confession

Then the blockbuster revelation came. Hicks had confessed the murder to his sweetheart, the pretty Miss Marjorie Jenkins! She was only fifteen at the time, and already the fiancée of Heber Hicks. He had confessed the murder to her on the 23rd, even showing her the rings he had taken from the widow's dismembered finger and the shell casings he picked up from the scene of the crime. Heber had admitted to her that he had tricked Joy Sparks into thinking that his mother was suing for divorce, leaving Jake penniless, except for some money that was in banks at Clay. Forging his father's signature on two \$300 checks, he had her cash the checks and made her believe that he was waiting for her nearby, at Pride's Station. Heber left late in the night with Joy Sparks in a buggy, ostensibly taking her to his father. Marjorie Jenkins was told that "about four miles from Clay . . . coming to a turn in the road . . . they ran into an impassable snow-drift." Heber told her "he drove over into a field to turn the horses around and told the girl they would have to walk the rest of the way" and said that "Mrs. Sparks walked in front for a while but asked Heber to go ahead and break the deep snow." Heber told Miss Jenkins that he did this but later "dropped back to the girl's side, drew his revolver and fired" but that "the first shot missed." Miss Jenkins testified that

"the girl cried out beseechingly 'Heber, Heber'" and said "her outcry was quieted by the second shot [when] she fell to the ground mortally wounded."

The August, 1918 trial was a short affair, with the lawyers for Heber arguing a case of emotional insanity. It failed. Heber Hicks was sentenced to a life term in prison, with only one juror sparing him from a death sentence. Eighteen years later, in 1936, the decision to spare Heber Hicks' life would bring about the death of five more, and fascinate the subscribers of the *Democrat* and *Log Cabin* yet again, but that is a story for another issue!

Phillip Naff is the Web manager of Harrison County Historical Society's Web page: www.harrisoncountyky.us/historical-society. You may contact him at philnaff@comcast.net



Joy Vance Sparks (above) was murdered by Heber Hicks in 1918. Photo, *The Henderson (Ky.) Daily Gleaner*, February 14, 1918