

# Harrison Heritage News

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*Last Cumulative Index:* See  
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## Remains To Be Seen:

Philip Naff

It was in the 7th or 8th grade that I was first introduced to the short stories of the famed American author Washington Irving (1783-1859). At the time I lived at West Point, New York, and his home, "Sunnyside," was only an hour's drive away. But, to see the dark hollows and haunts of his most famous literary creations, Rip Van Winkle, Ichabod Crane, and the Headless Horseman, one just had to peer out the schoolroom windows. Often one could hear a distant rumble on the mountain that was known as Storm King . . . and even might wonder if Rip's story of the ninepin bowlers of old Henry Hudson's crew might be true . . . but, no, it was just an eighteen-wheeler roaring up the mountainside.

In the summer of 1936 the inhabitants of Northern Kentucky might not have been considered too reckless if they had thought that another creation of Irving's, the Headless Horseman, had taken up residence in Kentucky, for his handiwork seemed apparent, with torsos, heads, and hands popping up all over the landscape. No such legends were involved here, however, as the FBI and the state and local police forces of Kentucky, Indiana, and Ohio were soon to find out. It took them a few weeks to put all the pieces together . . . ehem! . . . and nationwide manhunt was launched for the aptly-named "Head and Hands Killers."

"Who did it?," "Why all the killing?," you might ask. Well, that is not exactly a short story, but it all wouldn't have happened if a lady named Miss Margaret Teresa Flora Miller of 628 Crown Street, Cincinnati hadn't the need of a chauffeur, or perhaps the excuse to hire one,

in 1934. She found a chauffeur . . . and he took her for a ride, alright . . . for you see, his name was Heber Luther Hicks!

### **The Recluse and the Rat**

Miss Miller was a character, that is for sure . . . and she had played quite a few in her time. The Cincinnati native and graduate of the College of Music and the Art Academy was a former opera singer (stage name: Florence D'Ephia) who had traveled widely to Europe, to Canada, and even Alaska. During her career she had been a member of the then-renowned Walter Damrosch Opera Company, and she even claimed to have performed with New York's Metropolitan Opera Company. However, all the fame that life on the stage could bring wouldn't keep life from crashing down all around her after a failed romance with Cincinnati racing columnist Bert Collyer ("Collyer's Comments on the Sport of Kings" in the Cincinnati Enquirer). At about the same time, her father, John O'Farrell Miller, who had doted on her, spending large sums on her and her career, passed away.

For fourteen years, despondent over the failed romance and her father's death, she rarely left her modest home in what was described as "a quiet residential section" in Cincinnati. In the 1930s she was living as a virtual recluse, imprisoning herself in a house almost devoid of furniture, except for a

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## President's Corner

Bob Owen

We had a great meeting this last month with the presentation by Marsha Hicks, State President, on the history and operations of the Colonial Dames XVII Century. The organization is a Patriotic, Genealogical, and Heraldic Society composed of women who can trace their ancestors in this county to the Founders who settled the thirteen original colonies before 1701.

This past month, the CAFÉ-Arts Council, working to upgrade the Children's theater, took procession of 300 plus slightly used seats which it hopes to install in the Roh's Opera House Theater. The Council is still soliciting funds to pay for the transportation of the seats and their installation. A long-term goal of the Council is to save and restore the Roh's Opera House Theater as a community landmark and entertainment center.

Don't forget that the next meeting will be on October 19th at the Cynthiana-Harrison County Library meeting room. The presentation for that meeting will be on Griffith Woods and an update on the plans for Griffith Tavern.

I strongly encourage everyone to attend the November meeting when Philip Naff will do a Harrison County genealogy workshop. 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

### Meeting September 15, 2006

After the excellent turn-out and wonderful response from the last meeting held at the Handy House, the Handy House Committee is offering tours to civic, church, and other groups. Anyone interested should contact Billy or Sharon Fowler 859-234-5110 or Marilyn Bell 859-234-1311. Robert Poindexter told a funny story about the old distillery at Lair. He said that when Prohibition went into effect his grandfather was contacted to tear down a whiskey storage building, since it was no longer needed. He was not sure if he was also paid or just received the material as payment. His grandfather used the material to build the lumber yard in Cynthiana. What makes this story humorous is what happened next. When Prohibition ended they once again needed the storage building. The lumber yard that had been built with the lumber from the old building became the supplier of lumber for the new building. **Program:** Marsha Hicks did a wonderful job of informing us about the Colonial Dames XVII Century. Anyone seeking more information about the group or interested in joining can contact Marsha. Her contact info is: Mrs. John L. Hicks (Marsha), State President Kentucky, State Society CDXVII Cent, 4924 Grantham Place, Louisville, KY 40222-6414, e-mail: [mthicks@insightbb.com](mailto:mthicks@insightbb.com). *Correction: President's Corner last month mistakenly identified Sharon Fowler as "Karen."*  
Submitted by Billy Fowler.

### Upcoming Harrison County Historical Society Programs

October 19 - A representative from Friends of Griffith Woods will discuss the planned activities of this volunteer 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.

December 5—Joint potluck with Harrison Co. Museum, Tuesday at 6:00 pm at the Cynthiana Methodist Church.

## Cynthiana-Harrison County Museum

112 S. Walnut St., Cynthiana, Ky. 41031  
Martha Barnes, President

### Funerary Displays in the Museum

On behalf of the museum folks, we have strived to use this column to promote the museum, to inform readers of our progress and activities, and to encourage volunteers, donations, and visitors. Ideas for this space always are welcomed. I appreciated our editor's suggestion for this month's column - "funeral home items in the museum to go along with Philip's spooky October article."

When school groups tour the museum, the children consistently are intrigued by the funeral home display. The wicker body basket evokes the most comments - "Ooh, look at that" - "Awesome!" - "Gross!" - "I'm out of here" - "How was that used?" The body basket with lid and the two companion wicker flower urns are the focal point of the display. Jimmy and Patty Drake saved the basket and urns. They had been in the basement of the Main Street Whaley Funeral Home for years. They retrieved them and presented them to the museum. Soon thereafter, the flood of 1997 ruined everything in that basement.

We also have a wooden coffin - a simple box painted black in that shape used long ago. The wicker basket seems the ideal place to display the numerous funeral home advertising items - fans and calendars. Remember the hand fans used at church? Unusual photographs, memory books, embalming instructions, and funeral cards also are a part of the exhibit.

Funeral homes and undertakers are a part of Cynthiana and Harrison County's history from the earliest times. Perrin's 1882 history tells us that the small communities throughout the county had their own undertakers. Our webmaster, Philip Naff recently added a consolidated index of Smith-Rees and Whaley Funeral Home records to the web - [www.harrisoncountky.us/funerals](http://www.harrisoncountky.us/funerals).

A great number of cemeteries/graveyards are in the county. Some such as Battle Grove and the Old Graveyard on Main Street are well-maintained and provide both aesthetic and historical value to the community. Many cemeteries are on private property - many are unkempt - some are unknown. Cemeteries sometimes are involved in controversy. Some may recall that in 1980 the air tight casket of a child (possibly 1890's cholera victim) was unearthed in Leesburg. A cemetery is there under the firehouse - no known records of who is buried there exist.

At the museum, we have several historical publications for sale. The best known, *Chronicles of Cynthiana* (1894) by Lucinda Boyd (hardcover, \$20.) contains Harrison County's famous or infamous story of the hanging and ghostly appearances of David Sheely.

Did you attend the soiree at the post office in December, 1993 when about 300 people awaited the spirit of Lucinda Boyd? In her *Chronicles* (page 259), she had promised to arrive at midnight. The people were not disappointed - at 12 o'clock, she rode into the parking lot of the Ladish Road post office atop a black steed. Believe what you will!

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board placed between two chairs, which served as her bed. In the basement, she was hoarding a supply of marble, for the construction of a "marble house" in her back yard. In her attic were fifteen trunks filled with stage clothes, harkening back to the days when Miss Miller sang with the grand operas. It was said that "for modern clothes, she had no desire," that most times she wore the cast-off shoes and overcoats of her brother. She would spend her nights reading and studying race horses, then sleeping until noon or later.

Exactly where Miss Miller first encountered Heber Hicks is unknown, but he, too, was coming out of an imprisonment, but his was more self-inflicted than self-imposed. He had spent just over a decade in prison, first the Kentucky State Reformatory in Frankfort, then the State Penitentiary in Eddyville. Given a life sentence in 1919 for the murder of his father's lover, the widow Joy Vance Sparks, he was out in just eleven, even after bungled prison escape with two other cons back in 1921. [See Harrison Heritage News August 2006] But fortune always seemed to follow Heber Hicks in a sort of reckless way, and he was paroled to his mother's care, after having served only a fraction of his original sentence. Just after his parole in 1930 he was living comfortably with his parents, working as a clothing salesman in Cincinnati, but he was always getting into trouble, with minor arrests for bootlegging and robbery.

A neighbor of Miss Miller recalled that until Hicks came along, she "never saw Flora [Miss Miller] go further than her front yard" and it was reported it was only then that Miss Miller "started going out to night clubs with him and coming in at all hours of the morning." Miss Miller was quoted as saying, "I never had any fun when I was young . . . and now I'm going to have all I can before I die."

Miss Miller and Heber Hicks were certainly an odd couple despite their difference in age, she in her sixties, he in his late thirties, but Hicks was raised by well-to-do parents and perhaps learned from them all the polish and charm that would serve him well throughout his life, if only to keep getting him out of the trouble he was always in. A neighbor of Miss Miller remarked that "Hicks had her so under his control that she gave him money for anything he wanted," buying him three cars and even a night club in Kenton County.

Miss Miller's extravagant spending couldn't last forever - and soon the free access to the Miller fortune started to run out. After the death of her mother in December 1933, the family estate was evenly divided between herself, her brother, and retired Fire Captain Harry Miller, who had just recently purchased a summer home in Franklin County, Indiana, on the Whitewater River near New Trenton. Harry had always tolerated his older

sister's eccentricities, such as the time he took charge of a flock of sheep purchased by his sister for her home in Cincinnati. He didn't really like Heber Hicks, but tolerated him for his sister's sake. What Heber Hicks thought of Harry Miller is unknown, but Miss Miller's share of the family fortune was running out, and Harry's rumored wealth certainly made Heber think about Harry's future, but not in an all-too-promising way.

### **"Somewhere in Indiana"**

The sudden disappearance of Harry Miller from his summer home on June 11, 1936, didn't go unnoticed by his neighbors, but it could be explained. A call to his sister revealed that she had received a postcard from him telling her that he was going to be away on business for a while. Few were suspicious when, on June 19, a headless and handless corpse was discovered by a farmer hunting for his stray mules in Shelby County, Kentucky, just south of the Henry County line, but when the head and hands were discovered in a concrete lined box on June 28th by four boys out for a swim on a hot summer's day in Lake Butler over in Carroll County, the case broke wide open. A matchbook found at the scene of a mysteriously bloody patch of ground elsewhere near Carrollton alerted Harry's worried friends in Franklin County, Indiana, that trouble had found Harry after all. Harry Miller's dentist was called in from Ohio to identify his work, but when Miss Miller traveled to Carrollton accompanied by Hicks to view the remains, she doubted that they could be those of her brother. When Covington police discovered that Heber Hicks was connected to the Miller family, an ex-con in for a murder, he came under immediate suspicion. As Hicks drove up to Harry Miller's place in Indiana with Miss Miller, reportedly to investigate Harry's disappearance themselves, the police at the scene saw their chance and seized Heber Hicks and Miss Miller.

Indiana Police Superintendent Matt Leach, quite familiar with manhunts from Dillinger's days of robbing Indiana banks, took direct and personal charge of the case, and, in a move that was controversial even then, led the lawyers hired by Hicks' parents on a merry chase across Indiana, secretly hiding Hicks and Miller in small county jails across the state, not even signing him in, finally ending up in Jackson County in southern Indiana. All anyone knew was that they were "somewhere in Indiana." At Seymour, the risky technique paid off, yet only with a partial confession by Heber Hicks. As a condition for confessing, he asked that he speak first with Miss Miller. He did, even though what he said to her was overheard, it was left unspoken, but to

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a few. Then he signed a confession.

"To bury a dead man." That was the job description, plain and simple, and when the hardscrabble ex-con John Joseph Poholsky was offered the job and a share of the take by Heber Hicks in the spring of 1936, he took it. When Poholsky had second thoughts, Hicks brought William Arthur Kuhlman and Stephen Gore Williams on board. The gang was now complete. Kuhlman and Williams were brothers, in-laws as well as in crime, with Kuhlman being the rather "unartful dodger" to Williams older and smoother Fagin. All three had earned criminal degrees in state and federal reformatories and penitentiaries across the country, mostly for robberies, burglaries, and other petty crimes, but they always ended up going back for a little more "education." In the early spring of 1936 all three were free, "killing time," looking for another "job." Hicks hired them all, but gave them fair warning, that this was a "burning job," that if caught, all would go to the electric chair.

The plan: To kill Harry Miller at his home in Kentucky and bury him in Kentucky, using his disappearance to silently raid his accounts, dividing the proceeds from the sale of some investments in Harry's safe to pay Kuhlman, Williams, and Poholsky, perhaps eventually allowing Miss Miller to inherit her brother's estate so that she and Hicks could continue in their ways.

On June 3 the killers all took a car and headed for New Trenton, but Harry was no where to be found. Harry Miller's passion for dog racing had taken him to a track in Harrison, Ohio, that night, and it saved his life, but only for a short while. Hicks was not to be outwitted again, however, and so he arranged for Harry to be at home the next week, when they tried again. After a ferocious struggle, Hicks, Kuhlman, and Williams were able to subdue all 260-pounds of the retired fireman in his home, and they carried him to their car as Heber Hicks stayed behind to clear the scene of any suspicious

activities. But Harry was a corpse not yet dead, and when he regained consciousness in the backseat of the car which was taking him to his grave in Kentucky, Kuhlman leaned over and shot Harry Miller in the head.

The gang of killers had already picked out the spot for Harry Miller's grave during a picnic with their girlfriends several weeks before. But the cover of a picnic did not allow for digging much, and when the killers arrived in the pitch black of the night of June 11, they found the ground too full of rocks to dig a deep grave. Then the gruesome decision was made - it was an option considered before - to cut off the head and hands to avoid identification of the body and to dispose of the parts. Poholsky took an axe and cut Harry Miller to pieces, stripping him of all but his underwear and encasing the head and hands in a box of cement. They found a culvert in which to hide the body in Shelby County and, as they were headed home to Cincinnati, threw the box into the shallow depths of Lake Butler.

With news of the arrest and confession of Heber Hicks the gang made a run for it. Poholsky considered turning himself in, but took his paltry profits from the crime, only forty dollars, and headed back to his native Pennsylvania. He was the first to be captured, in Ohio, but not until November. Kuhlman and Williams escaped to the West until they could bear each other's company no longer. In December, as the trial of Heber Hicks was in progress in Brookville, Indiana, Kuhlman was captured in Portland, Oregon, during the botched robbery of a movie theater. Just days later Williams was the last to be caught, ironically on what was perhaps his first day of legitimate work in his life. He was starting a job at a San Francisco department store, but his



Left to Right: Heber Luther Hicks, Frank Gore Williams, John Joseph Poholsky, and William Arthur Kuhlman. The mug shots are of the four convicts as they were being processed into the Indiana State Penitentiary at Michigan City, Indiana. Each was given a death sentence for the murder of Cincinnati Fire Captain Harry R. Miller. Indiana State Archives.

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sweetheart of a girlfriend turned him in for the reward money that Miss Miller had posted for the capture of the "Head & Hands Killers."

The jail in Brookville, Indiana, had never held more than one murderer at a time, and now the cells were filled with not one murderer, but two, then three, and finally four. After the conviction of Hicks just before Christmas, justice came swiftly for Poholsky, Williams, and Kuhlman, for all pled guilty, and all were sentenced to death in Indiana's electric chair. The three were dispatched in one night, just months after their capture. After it was over it was said that never before had so many paid the ultimate price for a single crime.

### **A Funeral to Remember**

While not very good at murder, in one respect Heber Luther Hicks certainly did not fail; he was certainly more than a success in getting his name in print since his teenage years, with at least 1,200 articles to his credit in more than four dozen papers in Kentucky and all across the Midwest, from California to New York. Headlines became his trademark, even once vying with the King of England (King Edward VIII and the abdication crisis in December 1936) for top billing as a mark of his achievements in crime.

However, the news of the swift execution of Hicks' cohorts, all on the night of June 10, 1937, seems to have satiated the public's interest in the story, and all that was left to do for Heber Hicks was to appeal his sentence, several times, only postponing his date with death. Near the end of the appeals process the chances of one appeal seemed so slim, that a hearse had already been sent from Kentucky and had to be called back en route as the news of another successful appeal came through. After the U.S. Supreme Court denied yet another stay, the news of his electrocution on May 6, 1938, wasn't the hot topic it once was. But, the story of his final homecoming, the funeral service and his burial at Benson Methodist Church at Kelat, did make the news in the *Cynthiana Democrat* and the *Log Cabin*.

After short services at the home of his parents in Cincinnati, the body was brought to Kelat. While the *Log Cabin* noted that nearly 900 viewed the remains, the *Democrat* reported that "at least 1,100 automobiles and in the neighborhood of 3,000 people attended." The paper reported that the "highway was so heavily crowded with cars that the road was blocked for some time." Leon Cummins, a cousin of the author, whose tale of the funeral was my first exposure to the story of Heber Hicks, was then only 16, and a cousin to the Hicks family on his mother's side. He attended the funeral with his parents and was curious to see what an electrocuted man looked like. Although the casket was open, all he could see was that Hicks' head was buried deep in a pillow, but he

remembered that cars were parked from U.S. 27 all the way to Kelat, with more people outside of the church than inside.

Although the Benson Church where his parents married is no more, the graves of the Hicks family, Jake, Effie, and Heber, can be viewed to the right side of the foundation of the old church.

*The Log Cabin* later eulogized Hicks with the statement "What a sad ending! Our hearts go out in sympathy to his parents. May this be a lesson to all as we travel from the cradle to the grave. Remember there are two ways, the broad way that leads to destruction and the straight and narrow way that leads to life eternal...." Unfortunately for Heber Hicks, his success in earning banner headlines was defined by the misfortune of others, for his chosen path was paved by murder.

### **The 5<sup>th</sup> Suspect**

And what of Miss Miller? The person who might have been termed the "fifth suspect" in the "Head and Hands Murder" assumed her mother's name shortly after the murder trial in 1936 to avoid any more publicity and moved into rooms at the Hotel Alms in Cincinnati. She resided there for nearly two decades, returning to her old ways for the last seven at the hotel, living in rooms "cluttered with the usual collection of sundries and rubbish of a recluse." In 1954 she began to have hallucinations and became violent. Police were called and she was taken into custody. She was declared mentally ill later that year and spent most of the rest of her life in a private sanitarium. Flora Miller died April 29, 1962.

When she died she left an estate valued at nearly \$200,000. She still had Harry's 24-acre farm near New Trenton, as well as a mansion she had purchased in the 1940s in Avondale, Ohio. She never lived a day in the mansion, but it served her as a bizarre personal museum, filled with nearly 25,000 items which were put up for auction. Among the items was the 1934 black sedan that Heber Hicks had used in her service, the odometer had never measured a mile more than since its return to the garage the day she and Heber Hicks were arrested at New Trenton.

Remarkable, bizarre, and gruesome, the "Head and Hands Murder" was truly a case the like of which "remains to be seen."

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