



ANCESTORS

Bartholomew County Genealogical Society

Jul - Sep Q3 2019

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2019 BCGS Calendar

*Unless otherwise noted, all sessions begin at 10:00 am in the Red Room
of the Bartholomew County Public Library*

Saturday, July 27

FIELDTRIP: Brownstown - Jackson Co. History Center

Friday AND Saturday, Sep 13, 14

BCPL History Days - Come see our booth in the Indiana Room !

Welcome to Our New Members:

Karen Rainey of Columbus, Indiana

Catherine Cullen King of Alexandria, Virginia

INSIDE:

p2: HIGHLIGHTS - by Marcus Speer: May Meeting 2019

p3-9 **Part 2 of Robert Hobbs' Article on THE FAMOUS AND INFAMOUS VISITORS.** His article continues with The Infamous Visitor: The Time the Murderer Came to Town

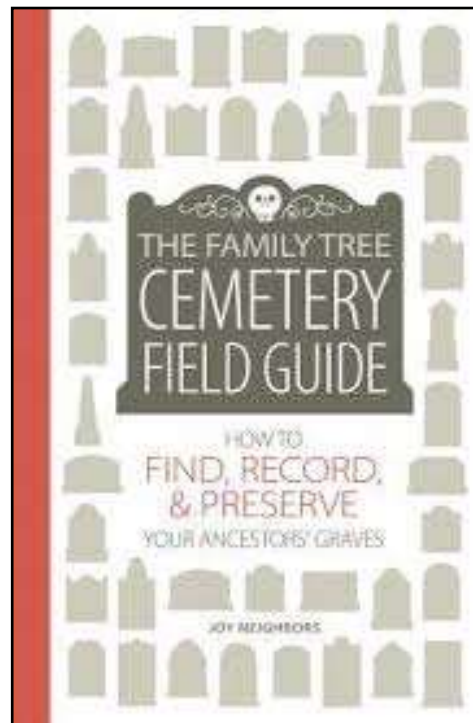
*Editor's Note: Many thanks to all BCGS Board Members for their time and articles to make Ancestors the "Voice of BCGS" !
As a courtesy, and to insure the personal communication with each of you, their columns are not edited. Hope you enjoy !*



Highlights -by Marcus Speer

PROGRAM MINUTES May 4, 2019

With so much going on during May (2019), BCGS'S program was early in the month and was on Saturday, May 4. Attendance included 17 members and 8 guests with one guest becoming a member. Our presenter was Joy Neighbors, author of the book, "The Family Tree Cemetery Field Guide" – How to Find, Record, and Preserve Your Ancestors' Graves. On her blog, (<https://agraveinterest.blogspot.com/>), she shares: "I am a Tombstone Tourist: someone who loves to wander cemeteries. I find it akin to visiting a museum: an opportunity to enjoy rarely seen sculpture, intricate carvings, and amazing architecture, all in a tranquil outdoor setting."



Neighbors shared the four part of her book.

First: Planning the trip to the cemetery. You should ask: "What am looking for?"

Second: Researching on hallowed ground. Joy reminded us to set your goals, plan the trip, read the stones.

Third: Understanding the silent language of the stones. Joy shared that they were good at subtleties that carried to their stones ... the silent language.

Fourth: Digger deeper. Joy encouraged us to remember that there is always some thing

Before providing a Q/A, Joy reminded us that there are lots of skeletons in our closets, so make them dance. Lastly, there is no shame for what your ancestors did, it's your story.

Another great genealogical program provided through a special collaboration between the Bartholomew County Public Library and BCGS.



THE FAMOUS AND THE INFAMOUS

VISITORS Part 2

The Infamous Visitor: The Time the Murderer Came to Town

In the early summer of 1965, my dad took us to the lot north of our new hometown Benton, Illinois on which he had chosen to build our new house. We were met by Roy Sanders, who lived next door with his wife Louise. He sold my dad the lot, where in the past, he had raised pigs. Mr. Sanders reminded me at the time of Mr. Haney, the slick-talking hayseed character on the popular TV show "Greenacres."

He warned us to watch our step as he walked us around the weedy lot, located on a slightly sloping hill overlooking Route 37 North and the state forestry beyond. He pointed out a small shack hardly visible behind the lot, but still on the property he owned.

"That right thar is the place were the very first bomb was dropped from a aero plane in the country!" We all gasped in awe and surprise. "Yep, that was Charlie Birger's gang hide-out 'bout 35-40 year ago and their enemy gang hired a aero plane to fly over so they could drop a homemade bomb on it!"

Being the thirteen-year-old, inquisitive, challenger of authority, and unjustly perceived smart-fleck, I asked, "If that's true, then why is the hideout still standing there?"

Mr. Sanders cleared his throat as if to stall for time and huffingly answered, "The bomb were a dud!" He offered no further explanation and moved on to point out a stake in the distance topped with a flapping, sun-faded, red flag that the surveyors had planted deep in the ground designating the corner of the lot formed by the meeting of the south and east property lines.

I still wasn't buying his tale and in about three years, in my high school Illinois History class, I would learn a story closer to the truth.

In the meantime until our new house was completed, we were forced to rent an old, two story house in town that was a spooky hybrid of a shingled castle and the house television's Adams Family occupied. We only lived primitively in four of the downstairs rooms. The round room adding to the castle flair on the first floor was used for the storage of sheet-draped furniture and boxes left unpacked from the moving van. The whole non air-conditioned second floor of the manse remained empty of any household furnishings. It became my domain where I privately played on my portable record player my 45s of The Supremes and The Beatles (of course) as soon as they became available at the local music store. This was the same store on the Public Square where George, who became known as "the quiet Beetle," was reported to have purchased the recordings of American blues artists and, believe it or not, those of Hoosier songwriter



Tripping MY ROOTS Over

-by Bob Hobbs

The Infamous Visitor: The Time the Murderer Came to Town (cont)

Hoagy Carmichael. He obviously was or became a big fan for I read recently that a few nights prior to George's death due to complications of lung cancer, he sat up all night with a close friend listening to nothing but the recordings of Hoagy Carmichael. The Benton residents who were lucky enough to meet George will always remember "the young man with the strange accent and the even stranger haircut."

Fast forward a few years (1968) to the mandatory Illinois History class my sophomore year in high school. Among what we learned of the history of Illinois in general, we also were introduced to some local history.

We learned that when Illinois became a state in 1818, our county, Franklin (named after Benjamin) was twice the current size. When it was divided in half, the northern half remained Franklin County and a town, named Benton, was built in the center to be the county seat. The lower half was named Williamson County and Marion became its county seat. The main source of the local history used was the book titled "Bloody Williamson." Williamson and surrounding counties were considered bloody for several reasons.



The simple burial of one of the nameless slain workers who was a victim of the mine war which became known as "The Herrin Massacre."

Tripping MY ROOTS Over

-by Bob Hobbs

The Infamous Visitor: The Time the Murderer Came to Town (cont)

When there was a coal mine strike to demand better working conditions, the mine owners sent strike breakers or “scabs” (mostly Blacks via a train from Chicago) to work the mines. Needless to say this was not well-received by the coal miners or their union. The story goes that as the strike breakers got off the box cars they were met with men holding rifles. They were instructed to start running. As the would-be strike breakers ran to the open field, they were shot dead. The killing became known as The Herrin Massacre and no one was charged in these murders. Based on this lack of justice, African-Americans from Chicago traveling by automobile on their way to visit relatives in southern states were warned to avoid stopping for any reason in Williamson or surrounding counties. This resonated with them for many years afterward. While Centralia, our former home town had black residents, Benton and other communities in Franklin and Williamson did not. They didn’t dare. In addition, during this era of the 1920s, there was a proliferation in the area of gangsters and bootleggers.

The most notorious of these gangsters in the region was Charlie Birger. He was born Shachna Itzih Birger on February 5, 1881 of Jewish ancestry in Adygia, Russia. As a child, his family immigrated to New York City and then on to St. Louis, Missouri when he was about eight-years-old . He became a newspaper boy for the *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*, later enlisted in the U.S. Army and was stationed in South Dakota where he was considered a good soldier and was later honorably discharged. While living out west he became a real-life cowboy. He eventually moved to southern Illinois where he met his wife Beatrice and became a coal miner. He later was also a saloon keeper, married, and became the father of two daughters.



Charlie Birger was thought to be “a dead ringer” for silent film Tom Mix

He was a medium-sized wiry man, who in his early 40s didn’t look a day over 30. He was known for his dapper appearance, often having his clothes tailored by the best Chicago tailors. He was thought by some to be a “dead ringer for Tom Mix,” the actor in silent movies star popular post-World War I. He was charismatic and sinister to the point of being unsettling. He craved adulation and rewards for what he did no matter how unnoteworthy. Ultimately what he did that brought him the fame he desperately desired was to rob and kill people. He became the supplier of the public’s thirst for both liquor during prohibition and high drama during an age and in an area of the country that was both dry and colorless.



Tripping MY ROOTS Over

-by Bob Hobbs

The Infamous Visitor: The Time the Murderer Came to Town (cont)

At the time it was an area unwelcoming of immigrants partly attributed to the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. Contrary to what one might have guessed, his gang and rival gangs found a common foe in the KKK. In the next five years, he would help plan and execute the death of the Klan's leader, spend six months in jail for boot-legging, become a partner with (and later an enemy of) the notorious Shelton brothers in a slot machine enterprise, lead his gang in a decisive defeat in a mid-day gun battle on Election Day, April 13, 1926 in the center of downtown Herrin, Illinois, and above all, be responsible directly or indirectly for the murders of more than a dozen people.

Ironically he was tried and convicted and sentenced to death for the murder of a man he ordered to be carried out, but not the murders of any victims he was known to have personally brought about by his own hand. He was clever in that he would allow his rivals to publicly threaten him and then later claim he killed them in self-defense. He was a real enigma in that he had this violent history, but was known buy coal in the winter and leave groceries on the porch of poor families in the area. Being one himself, he was a friend to the immigrants. While hanging out at a pool hall, he was known to take off his derby and pass it around in order to help out beggars who happened by. Some citizens saw him a version of Robin Hood: He killed and robbed from the well-off and bad and gave to the poor and good. One could say that if you didn't get on his bad side, to know him was to like him!

The murder that enabled the law to put him away for good involved Mayor Joe Adams of West City, a very small suburb of sorts to the west of Benton. The only thing than divides the two municipalities today is Interstate 57, the four- lane highway that runs the length of Illinois from Cairo (pronounced Kay-ro) at the southernmost point where the Ohio River flows into the Mississippi, north to the city of Chicago.

Mayor Adams, a former car salesman, had been an accomplice of Birger's, but became aligned with a rival gang, the Shelton's. The way I remember the story of the murder as told to me almost 50 years ago was that Charlie instructed two brothers to pay Mayor Adams "a visit." They stepped up on the porch to find just the screen door separating them from the interior of the house. They knocked at the door and the young daughter came skipping to greet them.

Little daughter: Hello!

One of the brothers: Hello! Is you're Daddy at home?

Little girl: Yes! I'll go get him. Daddy, you got com-pan-y!



Tripping MY ROOTS Over

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The Infamous Visitor: The Time the Murderer Came to Town (cont)

“Big Joe” Adams lumbered (he was rather obese) to the door only to be met with a spray of machine gun fire. Another version, presumably more accurate, had Adams’ wife answer the door. She went to her husband, who had been taking a nap, to tell him two young men were at the door who said they had a note for him from Carl Shelton. Adams went to the door and was handed the note. As he read it, a man in a sheepskin coat let the barrel of his revolver slide down his sleeve until the handle of the gun was in his hand. He fired and at the same time his accomplice began firing. The couple's young daughter Arian chased after the assailants until she was called back to the house by her mother.



Birger (standing center in white shirt) and his gang in 1928

When word spread of the killing, many assumed Charlie Birger was behind it. When questioned about the murder, Mrs. Adams had no doubts who was behind it as she had heard Birger threaten her husband many times. She once heard his familiar voice on the telephone and inquired about the safety of herself and the two children. He assured her that she and her children had nothing to fear from the guns of the Birger gang and he went so far as to suggest that she take out life insurance on her husband’s life. For her children’s sake I hope she took the advice before it was too late!



Tripping MY ROOTS Over

-by Bob Hobbs

The Infamous Visitor: The Time the Murderer Came to Town (cont)

While the account I remember was probably inaccurate, so was Mr. Sanders' tale of the hide-out on the land just beyond the newly-planted hedge in our backyard.

That decaying structure could very well been a hide-out of some lesser known bootleggers, but it was Birger's road house and hangout Shady Rest, located in Williamson County, that the Shelton Gang had unsuccessfully attempted to bomb from an airplane. Another interesting innovation of the Shelton Gang was their armored car, a truck converted into a tank. The Birger gang soon had the same. They were reminiscent of *The Monitor* and *The Merrimac* of Civil War fame.

Charlie Birger, after many failed attempts at his capture, was eventually arrested and tried for his part in the murder of Joe Adams. The story of his arrest promised to be one of the biggest stories of the year. Along in the carload of William County deputies was Special Deputy Homer Butler, then the city editor of the *Marion Dailey Republican*. Previously known as the *Marion Monitor*, the newspaper was established in 1874 by James Polk Copeland, the brother of my great-grandfather DeWitt Clinton Copeland.

Charged with accessory to murder, Charlie's defense attorney tried to save him from the death penalty by claiming that he was insane. His old friend, Orris McGlasson even testified that when he had visited Charlie in jail two months prior he believed Charlie was indeed "crazy." McGlasson testified Charlie reminded him of patients he had known while working at Anna State Hospital, a facility for the insane. The jury did not believe the story or the insanity plea and it took them only twelve minutes to find Charlie legally sane. An appeal for a new trial was made to the Illinois Supreme Court and was denied on February 24. April 13 was the date initially set for the hanging, but the tactics of his lawyer bought him a few additional days. During the course of his initial arrest and transfer to the Franklin County Jail and his trial in the county courthouse located a couple of blocks away in the middle of the Benton Square, Charlie Birger would be a guest of Benton, Illinois for approximately one year leading up to his demise.

During his stay at the Franklin County Jail, Deputy Charles Smith, one of many who came to know Charlie Birger for the wit long familiar to the newspapermen with which he frequently spoke, relayed that Charlie "had requested burial in a Roman Catholic cemetery because that would be the last place the devil would think of looking for a Jew."

Meanwhile, as Charlie paced his roomy cell, he could hear the hammering from the building of the scaffold below the jail's second story window. Soon thereafter from another town came Phil Hanna to test the trap and the rope, as he had done for his sixty previous hangings. As he worked, the gentle, middle-aged hangman was unnerved by the raving of the prisoner next door.



Tripping MY ROOTS Over

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The Infamous Visitor: The Time the Murderer Came to Town (cont)

Charlie denied final interviews with many of the newspapers who requested one, but granted his last on the night of April 18, 1926 with Roy Alexander of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The publication was the newspaper Charlie had delivered as a boy so many years before. Alexander asked him about his reported suicide attempts, of which there were two. In one he made strips of his blanket, tied them together, and attempted to hang himself from a horizontal bar of his cell, only to be revived by the deputy on duty. In the second attempt he took arsenic, which also obviously failed. He told Alexander that he had prayed to God to stop his heart, but he now was resolved to have to die in the manner prescribed by the law. Throughout the night Charlie remained calm, speaking in a richer tone of his enemies without vindictiveness. When daylight finally came, he was still talking, but looked haggard and appeared increasing nervous.

Outside in the streets and on nearby buildings, armed guards scanned the crowd. Among the 5,000 observers there to witness the last public hanging in the state of Illinois was a 25 year-old married father of three who had traveled there from Centralia, Illinois. He was Troy Allen Hobbs, my paternal grandfather. My father Robert Edward would not be born until September 18, four months later. Also in that crowd was Bert Smith, who was quite possibly unknown to Troy and about six years his senior. Approximately 30 years later, Bert, a then widower, would marry my maternal grandfather's (Alphy Lenzini) younger, widowed sister.

At approximately 9:45 on the morning of April 19, 1928, ninety-one years ago to the month of the publication of this article, Charlie Birger was led by Sheriff Pritchard down the jailhouse steps around the corner to the scaffold that had been erected beneath his cell. Before mounting the thirteen wooden steps, he did not fail to notice the wicker basket that would soon hold his body. A reporter, who was one of five hundred ticket holders entitled to a closer look of the proceedings, wrote that he spat in it as he passed. The remaining crowd filled the street, occupied the windows and rooftops of nearby buildings, and perched on the limbs of adjacent trees. Sheriff Pritchard and Hangman Phil Hanna were two of four who preceded Birger up the steps.

Hanna had met with Charlie earlier in his cell where he had injected him with a narcotic presumably to help him accept his pending fate. He had also asked him if he wanted a white or black hood. "Black," he answered with a flourish, "I am no Ku Klux."

Behind him in the professional was a deputy from Franklin County. Then came Rabbi J.R. Mazur of East St. Louis, whose eyes never left the Bible he carried in his hand.

STAY TUNED..... MORE TO COME IN THE NEXT ISSUE !!!!

Bartholomew County Genealogical Society

Membership year extends from Jan – Dec (includes 4 issues of ANCESTORS)

1 year Membership: Individual (\$10) Couple (\$15)

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