



# Mercer County Historical Society Newsletter

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Editor: Mary Jane Sticklen

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## Mercer County Historical Society & Essley-Noble Museum

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Aledo, IL 61231  
Phone: 309/582-2280

### Hours

April – Oct: Wed, Sat, Sun 1-5:00pm  
Nov - March: Saturdays 12:00-4:00pm



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### For Genealogy Queries write to:

MCHS Genealogy Dept.  
PO Box 269  
Aledo IL 61231-2504



Please address all correspondence to:  
PO Box 269

"Mail is no longer delivered to the museum building."

**Memberships available for \$15/household**

For membership or change of address contact:

Jim Runyon  
756 State Hwy 94  
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**Website:** [www.mchsil.org](http://www.mchsil.org)  
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## Lake Nelson

By Stephanie Braucht

At one time in Mercer County's past, Lake Nelson was the place to go for entertainment. In 1938, Lytle Nelson began to build a sixteen-acre lake for conservation purposes in the northwest quarter of section 15 of his farm in Duncan Township. He had the lake stocked with game fish, and then he hired workers in the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to plant a variety of trees around it.

When that project was finished in 1939, he decided to build a roller skating rink near the lake, because he wanted to provide recreation for his neighbors and people from the surrounding area. The building he constructed to house this skating rink measured 50 feet by 110 feet. The floor was hard-wood maple that he was able to buy second-hand from a fellow who had a rink in Davenport. The grand opening of the skating rink was celebrated along with our nation's independence on July 4, 1940. There were fireworks and skating for approximately 2000 people. People came from the neighboring farms and from Aledo, Joy, Buffalo Prairie and other towns. Now Lake Nelson provided opportunities for skating as well as fishing, swimming, and boating.



In 1940 shoe skates were too expensive, so Mr. Nelson provided clamp-on skates, which attached to the bottom of the skater's own shoes. Rental of a pair of these skates was included in the entrance charge of twenty-five cents. Public skating was available on Wednesday evenings, Sunday afternoons, and Sunday evenings. The rink was available for private skating parties on the other afternoons and evenings. During one summer the rink was in use for thirty-six nights in a row!

After the skating rink, Mr. Nelson added a tall wooden panel and screen on a hillside that was used to show movies on Sunday nights during the summer. Admission to the movies was twenty-five cents per carload. People sat on blankets on the ground or on their cars to watch the movies, which were black and white westerns, comedies, and cartoons.

About that time, Mr. Nelson also added a 72-foot-long eating shed. It contained two brick fireplaces on which to cook. No doubt many folks enjoyed using it to cook the fish they had caught in the lake and for potlucks and other get-togethers.

The next project for entertainment was a half-mile dirt race track which was three lanes wide. Mr. Nelson hosted "Tin Can Derbies," in which Model T's competed against each other and sometimes reached speeds of 60 mph. Twice a year there were motorcycle races. There was a baseball diamond in the center of the track.

In addition to the usual baseball games, horse shows were often held there. People also took their horses on trail rides in the timber. There were also horse-shoe courts and a deer park, featuring several different breeds of deer to watch. The white deer were the ones that stood out as being unique, and are the ones people seem to mention most often when talking about Lake Nelson.

Concessions were sold in the skating rink---pop, candy bars, ice cream cones, and cigarettes. On one Sunday night in particular, 2880 bottles of Coke (not counting the other flavors) and thirty gallons worth of ice cream in cones were sold! A relative, Forbes Nelson, had a popcorn machine and sold bags of popcorn for five cents every Sunday night. Reportedly he made \$30 to \$40 dollars every time.

On July 4, 1941, the governor of Illinois, Dwight Green visited Lake Nelson. He was scheduled to give a speech at the fairgrounds, but there wasn't much of a turnout. However, a large crowd was at the lake. So Governor Green joined the crowd at the lake and spoke to the 5000 people who were there that day.

Lytle's son Sam, who currently owns the property where all this took place, helped his father with the business in all aspects. In particular though, in the summers, he had to mow three acres of grass with a

push-mower. In the winter, when the rink was closed from January until April, he helped sand the maple floor to prepare it for the next summer's activity. When Sam entered the Navy in the fall of 1952, his father decided it was time to close the operation. He didn't think he could handle it alone.

There still are many people who fondly remember good times at Lake Nelson. Some are reading this article right now and have smiles on their faces. What a wonderful slice of Mercer County history!

*Thanks to Laura Nelson Rivas for providing much of the information for this article.*



## *Memories of Lake Nelson*

Thank you to those who shared special memories of Lake Nelson.

Memories from Twyla (Morrow) Holmes: I remember Lake Nelson in the late 1940's and early 1950's as the place to be on summer weekends. My mother's family, the Mitchell's, were related to the Nelson's and went there by the carload. Lots of families would picnic

there, see movies, skate and fish on the lake. A blanket on the ground was our picnic table with everyone sitting around eating the food they had brought. Movies were shown after dark with everyone sitting on those same blankets.

Most of all I remember learning to roller skate there. Learning to skate wasn't easy as I remember falling a lot. My Dad threatened to rent a third skate so that when I fell I would have that third set of wheels instead of bruising my backside so much. The skate

pavilion had drop sides so they

could have good ventilation on those hot summer days and nights. Early air conditioning. Those posts that were left after opening the doors were a good place to grab onto when you had trouble stopping. A lot of people skated there and they were good. I never got the hang of skating backwards, but there were some that made it look easy and graceful.

From Evelyn (Line) Yerkey: We moved west of Perryton Church in 1940 when I was in seventh grade. I can remember my parents taking us to Lake Nelson on Sunday nights to roller skate while they watched the movie there. That is where I learned to



skate. When I was 16 I was dating my future husband James Griffith and we went roller skating practically every Wednesday and Sunday nights when it was open. I think it closed in the winter time. I have memories of the many good times we had then. James was a better skater than I but I managed to stay upright.

Kathleen Joseph's memories: Lots of fun and many life-long friends. I married the skate boy (Joe) that put on my skates and I still have our shoe skates in the attic. Wonderful memories!

From Kathleen's talk with Ralph Jones: Macy Nelson and Ralph were the first Skate Boys and Lytle bought them Lake Nelson jackets. Ralph wore his everywhere, including school (nice advertisement). One time Ralph put eight pairs of skates on one person before they found a pair that worked. He helped cut ice from the pond that would be used in the pop coolers in the summer. The skating rink was built by Henry Beenie of Eliza (Dave Haney's grandfather).



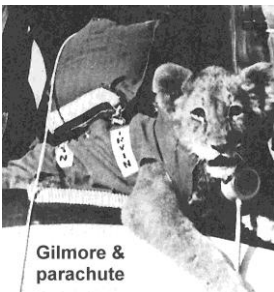
### Gilmore the Lion

by Stephanie Braucht

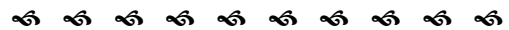
After the last issue of the newsletter went out, I received a call from Fred Steele, who currently lives in California. Fred, a former pilot, aeronautical engineer, and Mercer County native, was intrigued by the story about Arthur Fremont (A.F.) Gilmore and the Gilmore Oil Company. He wanted to make sure

I knew about an unusual member of the Gilmore Oil Company "family." In 1930, Roscoe Turner, a barnstormer and well-known pilot, convinced A.F.'s son to sponsor his airplane in order to promote the Gilmore products. Turner acquired a lion cub, and, since the logo of Gilmore Oil was a lion, the cub was named Gilmore. Gilmore went with Turner as he promoted company products, which were used to power and maintain his plane. Altogether Gilmore logged 25,000 miles of time in the air, wearing his

own custom-made parachute. He was with Turner when he set three flight records in 1930. When Gilmore reached 150 pounds, his flying experiences ended because he was too big for the cockpit. For a long time, Gilmore lived at what



was then the Union Air Terminal in Burbank, CA. Fred Steele not only knew Roscoe Turner, but also saw Gilmore often there in Burbank on the many occasions that he traveled into and out of that airport. Gilmore was 22 years old when he died in 1952. His body was stuffed and currently resides in cold storage at the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC.



### Curator's Corner

Hello to all!

Put your hands together for our landscaping friends from Sherrard. The Jinks couple, Martha and Robert Jinks, planned and planted hostas in great fashion in front of our museum. The new look is terrific and brings out the murals that are painted on the outside of our building. Thanks to you both!

Things are moving along quite nicely in our museum. Rhubarb Fest was a great success and we are looking forward to the county fair in July. Friends from far and wide have been visiting for genealogy information and to see our displays. Our Genealogy Committee has been diligently work to give everyone better accessibility to information. New information has been coming in, especially in the way of family histories. Also many items have been donated through generous friends for display, so come in and see what's new, and old, at our Essley-Noble Museum.

Veda Meriwether, Curator



### Meet us at the Fair

Be sure to stop and visit with us afternoons and evenings during the Mercer County Fair July 13-17. Our booth is in the SW corner of the Merchants Building and will feature displays, demonstrations, and the "Name That Tool" contest.



# a quick note...

- A special thank you to all of those who helped make our sales booth a success at the Rhubarb Fest and to all of the volunteers for another memorable 5<sup>th</sup> grade tours!
- The museum will open at 10:00 Aug. 28 for Antique Days. Special demonstrations are planned.
- Revisit our updated website. More information and photos have been added in the Museum Highlights and you can view past copies of the newsletter from summer 2005 through 2008.



## Coming Events for 2010

- July 13-17** Mercer Co. Fair booth in the Merchant's building Exhibits and "Name the Tools" contest
- Aug. 28** Antique Days, special exhibits and extended museum hours
- Oct. 18** Fall open meeting. 7:00 p.m. About and at the restored Graham Lee barn - 135th Ave, 1 mile west of Hwy. 94
- Oct. 31** Last day of summer hours
- Nov. 6** First day of winter hours, Saturdays only, 12:00-4:00



## Website

Our new website [www.mchsil.org](http://www.mchsil.org) has recently been undated with photos, membership and contact information, and a link to previous years' newsletters. Check us out and we will try to periodically update the site with more photos and features.

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