

Picture postcard speaks to power of donations

As a not-for-profit institution, the McLean County Museum of History relies to a considerable extent on the generosity of the public to collect, preserve, exhibit, and make available the heritage of this area and its people.

Take, for instance, this remarkable picture postcard of Moore's Mill in southern McLean County. It was donated to the museum several weeks ago by Bloomington resident David A. Hall, a history buff, Illinois Wesleyan University Titans super fan, and museum friend and volunteer. David also keeps an eye out for historical items of local interest, and makes donations to the museum from time to time.

And wow, this postcard—offering as it does a view of the mill never before seen by museum staff—is an absolute gem! Historic images—as anyone looking at old family photos can attest—are one of the more impactful means to explore and better understand the past in all its complexities.

Nevertheless, you might be asking yourself, what's so great about some old postcard showing some old mill? Well, one answer to that very good question is that the story of pioneer-era gristmills is inextricably linked to the larger narrative of Euro-American settlement.

In fact, there were few matters of greater importance to the early settler than the milling of grain. Early farmers had little choice but to travel long distances to have their corn, oats, rye and wheat ground into flour or feed—the staff of life for pioneering families and their livestock.

Before the proliferation of steam-powered mills, there were several dozen water mills scattered throughout McLean County, with a cluster—gristmills and sawmills alike—lining the Mackinaw River in Lexington and Money Creek townships.

The most celebrated mill in McLean County, though, was the aforementioned Moore's Mill, located on the south bank of Sugar Creek, about three miles west of the Village of McLean. Its fame mostly rests with the fact that it was last operational water-powered mill in McLean County, as it remained an ongoing concern into the 1910s.

John Caton erected the mill in 1842, but not long afterward, he swapped it for 160 acres of nearby farmland. New owner Jacob Moore installed a pair of 64-inch diameter millstones, and built an “ingenious system of shafts, and cogwheels, all made of wood,” which transferred the energy of running water into the turning of millstones.

Moore's son David eventually took over the family business, and his upgrades included enlarging the dam, installing a modern turbine wheel, and replacing the hand-hewn mechanicals with steel shafting and cast-iron gears. After David Moore passed away in 1909, his son Lee kept the business going for another four years before shutting the mill down for good.

Photographs—no matter how remarkable or historically illustrative—rarely tell the whole story. Luckily, the museum's archival collections include files and original manuscripts relating to Moore's Mill and local milling.

For instance, there's a nine-page handwritten history of the famed mill dating to 1902 and authored by W.C. Arnold, editor and manager of *The McLean Lens*, the town's weekly newspaper.

"Alone and completely shut in on three sides by willows and other timber growth, it is so nearly hidden that a stranger might easily pass by without discovering its presence," observed Arnold, of the mill a dozen years before its closing. "And yet the old mill grinds on, and on," he added, "keeping time to music of splashing water, while its dark, weather-beaten figure represents the last unbroken link to the chain of events uniting the present time with a heroic and almost forgotten past."

Romance and the supposed heroic past aside, it's important to remember that water mills—though picturesque they might be—were also engines of Euro-American settlement. As such, they were harbingers of the rapid conquest of the land and the indigenous people who had called it home.

The McLean County Museum of History boasts not only an exceptional archive and library, but also an object collection numbering some 20,000 items—everything from Civil War rifles to wedding dresses. And when it comes to the story of Moore's Mill, we're in luck. In 2005, Bonnie Schultz gifted to the museum several salvaged parts of mill's gear assembly, all likely dating to the 1870s.

Let us now return to the postcard donated by David A. Hall, for the reverse side points to a fascinating chapter of McLean County history—though one wholly unrelated to Moore's Mill itself! "Genuine photo by C.U. Williams, Bloomington, Ill.," reads a printed message on the backside.

A Brooklyn, N.Y. native, Charles U. Williams came to Bloomington in 1867, establishing himself as a photographer and successful picture postcard manufacturer. He enjoyed a divinely profitable venture by printing and selling tens of thousands of postcards featuring evangelist and tent show revivalist Billy Sunday, one of the more colorful national figures in the first two decades of the 20th century.

C.U. Williams and his son Walter then partnered to manufacture oil-burning home heaters, marketing them as a cleaner alternative to sooty, coal-fired furnaces. In 1945, Williams Oil-O-Matic merged with Detroit-based Eureka Co. to become vacuum maker Eureka-Williams of Bloomington. The company later dropped the “Williams” half of its name.

Luckily, the postcard’s reverse also includes a handwritten note that connects it to the past on a more personal level. Sent from the McLean Post Office in December 1915 by someone identified only as “Ollie,” the card is addressed to a Miss Fern Loffer of Urbana, Ill. (though the surname is a best guess, as it’s partly illegible.)

“Hello Fern,” the message begins. “We will be over Tuesday [illegible word.] The big four will get off at Champaign. Mother and Hazel are having quite a time. Will be there Tuesday [illegible word] Ollie.” The “Big Four Railroad” mentioned here—officially known as the Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago and St. Louis Railway—ran between Bloomington and Champaign.

A cursory search has turned up little in the way of clues about the sender (Ollie) or addressee (Fern). If you can help fill any gaps, please contact the museum at BKemp@mchistory.org.

Anyway, how did we get from Moore’s Mill to C.U. Williams, and then, to Ollie and Fern? That’s the joy of history—especially of the local sort. Dig just a little into the past and the stories unfold one after another, each one a window into a lost world.