

A History of the Smithville Historical Society

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In 1966, Mrs. Marge Harris and Mrs. Ben Will Thatcher,ⁱ among others, came together with the purpose of founding an organization that would preserve and promote the unique history of Smithville, Missouri. What followed was the founding of a historical society, the Smithville Missouri Historical Society, that would work to not only develop a museum, dedicated to the areas local history, but would also go on to host many events publicizing the richness of the surrounding area. The reason for the need of such a society was clear. As lifetime society member Ann Justus said, "you want your children to realize how you lived; how your parents lived."ⁱⁱ

The Articles of Incorporation of a General Not for Profit Corporation, submitted on October 19th, 1966, to the then Secretary of State James C. Kirkpatrick, include Mrs. Harold Harris, Mrs. Howard Taylor, Mrs. Bruce Coons, Mr. F.K. Justus, Jr., and Mr. Charles Shinn as the initial incorporates. All were long time residents of Smithville with family histories rooted long before them. A Board of Directors was established, and included Mrs. Harold Harris, Mrs. Howard Taylor, Mrs. Bruce Coons, Mr. F.K. Justus, Jr., Mrs. Mae Palmer, Mrs. Roy Dale, Mr. Link Evans, Mrs. Nash Meares, Mrs. Ben Will Thatcher, Mrs. C.B. McComas, Mr. Charles Shinn, and Miss Lois Fann. The purpose of the organization was,

"exclusively charitable, literary, educational, to procure, preserve, restore and maintain objects and items of historical interest to the citizens of Smithville, Missouri, and to study and promote the interest and appreciation for the historical background of Smithville, Missouri."ⁱⁱⁱ

Former membership records show nearly 20 people as holding lifetime memberships throughout the course of the society. These names include: Helen Bailey, Lela Fann, Lois Fann, Harold and Marjorie Harris, C.F. "Colonel" and Lou Kindred, America Lowmiller, Mable Mitchell, Lida E. Rule, Agnes Shepard, Stella Weber, Lucile Wright, Katie McFall, Georgia Reber, Geneva Yazel, Wilma L. Scobee, and Mary Lee Chiles.

Lifetime memberships were on an individual basis,^{iv} with some memberships given as a gift to friends or family members. Mrs. Geneva Yazel, one of the charter members, was given a lifetime membership from her sister, Mrs. Marjorie Harris.^v At the time, lifetime memberships were \$25.00, yearly individual memberships were \$1.00 per year, and student memberships, for students under the age of 18, were only \$.50.^{vi}

For many years the society continued to grow. In 1981^{vii}, membership records show 147 total yearly, dues-paying members, in addition to the lifetime members already listed. This number shows an increase of nearly 50 members from just 10 years prior. The popularity of the organization is obvious; many families listed show that multiple members of the family were involved. Among the larger families, the Jones', the Lambs and the Wrights each had at least five members of their families listed as yearly, dues-paying members of the society.

With the organization of the historical society, Mrs. Elizabeth Paterson Weber and her daughter, Stella, descendants of William H. Paterson, donated the historic Paterson home of Smithville to the society to be used as a museum. Located on Bridge Street, the house was built in 1887 and constructed of bricks fired in Mr. Paterson's own kiln. Under the historical society, it was called The Paterson Memorial Museum, after the family who built it and then, generations later, generously donated it. The donation was made contingent upon one thing: should it cease to be used as a museum by the Smithville Missouri Historical Society, ownership of the home would revert back to Stella Weber.

The first town event held by the historical society was *Progress-A-Rama*. The weeklong festival, held August 6-12, 1967, included events such as an auction, a parade, craft fairs complete with food and drink, a square dance, and a queen pageant. It commenced on Sunday, July 30 with an Ararat Rocket's Dixieland Concert. It commenced again, one week later, on Sunday, August 6, with an old-fashioned brush-arbor service and closed on Saturday, August 12, with a parade and dance. Members of the historical society worked diligently to make all events run smoothly. Krauss Justus, Jr., recalls setting up the spaces for the booths at the fair. "It was five dollars for a booth, two dollars for electricity, and we had more than 130 booths all together."^{viii}

Progress-A-Rama, the 106-page book, served as a program of sorts, but, more so, was an extensive look into Smithville's history. It chronologically details the town's humble beginnings, starting with the year 1822, when "Humphrey Smith settled, with his family, on the banks of Smith Forks."^{xix} The book also includes countless pictures depicting Smithville residents from as far back as 1900. Some show gatherings at the popular Paterson home, while other pictures show inside local stores and still others are class pictures from Smithville schools in the early 1900s. Many early Smithville residents are seen driving cars, attending races at the horse tracks and even awaiting trains at the once-busy Smithville depot.

Once *Progress-A-Rama* ended, full attention was given, again, to the refurbishing of the Paterson home. Upon its donation, the home had been unoccupied for some time. The devastating floods of 1965 had nearly destroyed the house, with water reaching above its second level. When the society received the house, they found it had not been cleaned since the flood. In fact, it was still full of the mud and debris that had covered the majority of the town in what had been the areas worst flood in decades. "During the flood there was water up to the second story of the house," said Mrs. [Lou] Kindred. "So when we got it, there was mud and other flood debris left from the year before."^x

In January, 1967, Lou Kindred, Kathryn Hanks, Lucile Taylor, and many others^{xi} began working Monday through Friday in an attempt to clean and refurbish the home. The woodwork was stripped and redone, the outside shutters were sanded and repainted, the inside shutters were commercially stripped and furnishings were brought in so that the house once again resembled the period in which it was built. In addition to their time, members of the historical society even donated some personal items as well. Estelle Wright recalls that she brought an antique doll, and someone else brought a child's rocking horse, and those items helped decorate the children's room at Christmas time.^{xii}

Over the 19-year duration of its opening, the museum hosted many events. The house was decorated each year for Christmas time, and Estelle Wright, with her husband, Jim, fondly remembers decorating the home with live greenery. Old records were played year-round on a Victrola, and it was here that the Smithville Missouri Historical Society held its first meeting that was open to the public, with 40-50 people in attendance.^{xiii}

After nearly two decades of being open to the public and hosting events such as ice cream socials and school tours, as well as seasonal holiday gatherings and other special events, the museum closed. A structural engineer found that the home was no longer safe enough to house visitors; the wall structures were too weak and neither the society nor the city could afford the repairs^{xiv}. While the society did try to raise the necessary funds by canvassing the town and going door-to-door, it proved too great a challenge. The items belonging to the society were sold in a well-attended auction. In 1986 the home was put on the market for sale on behalf of Stella Weber.^{xv}

While the Smithville Missouri Historical Society was no longer able to maintain the Paterson Memorial Museum, they were able to keep another very key piece of property belonging to them - the South Gale School House. Built in 1922, the building stood on the corner of Highways C and 92, just west of Smithville. At one time it enrolled as many as 70 to 75 students, some of them being young men and women who would help tutor the younger ones.^{xvi} When the school was no longer in use, it was moved from its original site to the ground adjacent Smithville High School, where it was used for some time by the school district. It housed the Industrial Arts classes, and later it was used as the Agriculture building.

In 1972, the Smithville school district donated the physical structure of the school to the Smithville Missouri Historical Society. The historical society raised the funds necessary to move it, and it was placed adjacent to the Paterson Memorial Museum on Bridge Street. The inside of the schoolhouse was refurbished in an attempt to restore it to its original period. A new roof, new glass windows and a fresh coat of paint were among the improvements made. School desks were donated by the Gordon school district, and items like a teacher's desk bell, a small world globe, and a United States flag showing only 48 states became decorations. With the closing of the Paterson Memorial Museum, in the late 1980s, the schoolhouse was again moved. The schoolhouse now sits on Church Street, where it is open to visitors by appointment and is also available for some private bookings.

Today the Smithville Missouri Historical Society continues to work diligently in preserving and promoting the history of Smithville, Missouri. Some of the original members are still active today, including Krauss and Ann Justus, Jim and Estelle Wright, C.F. "Colonel" and Lou Kindred, and Geneva Yazel.

C.F. "Colonel" Kindred has worked especially hard to keep the Smithville historical society active, making it a model community to other historical organizations. He has published numerous articles in local newspapers, as well as held several speaking engagements about the society. When asked why the Smithville Missouri Historical Society meant so much to him, he responded that he "wanted to keep the rich and diverse history of Smithville alive."^{xvii} It is

because of the efforts of all these key individuals that the society is still in existence, and the South Gale School House remains a historic landmark.

ENDNOTES

- i Interview conducted by Sarah McMillian with Lou Kindred, at Kindred's Chevrolet, Smithville, Mo., August 8, 2006
 - ii Interview conducted by Sarah McMillian with Ann and Krauss Justus, at the Justus home, August 17th, 2006
 - iii Articles of Incorporation of a General Not For Profit Corporation, October 19th, 1966, submitted to the Honorable James C. Kirkpatrick, Secretary of State, State of Missouri; notarized by Bruce N. Coons
 - iv Smithville Missouri Historical Society By Laws, dated 1966
 - v Interview conducted by Sarah McMillian with Geneva Yazel, at the home of Mrs. Yazel, August 15, 2006
 - vi Smithville Missouri Historical Society By Laws, dated 1966
 - vii Membership Records, Smithville Historical Society, 1970-71; 9/1/81-9/1/82
 - viii Interview conducted by Sarah McMillian with Ann and Krauss Justus, at the Justus home, August 17th, 2006
 - ix page 3, Progress-A-Rama, Printed by B&B Printing, Smithville, Mo. 1967
 - x Reprinted from the article, "Paterson Museum captures Smithville history," The Platte County Citizen, Friday, August 12, 1983
 - xi Interview conducted by Sarah McMillian with Lou Kindred, at Kindred's Chevrolet, Smithville, Mo., August 8, 2006
 - xii Phone interview conducted by Sarah McMillian with Estelle and Jim Wright, August 15
 - xiii Phone interview conducted by Sarah McMillian with Estelle and Jim Wright, August 15
 - xiv Interviews conducted with both Lou Kindred and Estelle Wright list this as the primary cause for closing
 - xv Letter dated November 21, 1986 to Mrs. Stella Weber and letter dated October 29, 1986 to Mr. Krauss Justus, both from Rick L. Outersky, Smithville City Administrator, confirm this
 - xvi "Recollections of South Gale School" by Lida Rule
 - xvii Interview with C.F. "Colonel" Kindred, at the Kindred home, October 10, 2006
- S. McMillian A Brief History of the Smithville Missouri Historical Society